The New Criterion

March 1993

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

Notes & Comments, 1

Clement Greenberg & the Cold War *by Hilton Kramer,* 4

The perversions of M. Foucault *by Roger Kimball,* 10

The enduring V. S. Pritchett *by Joseph Epstein,* 19

Professor Graff's program *by James W. Tuttleton,* 28

Camus today *by Renee Winegarten,* 35

Three late poems by Heinrich Heine *translated, with an introduction, by Martin Greenberg,* 43

Art: Assemblage *by Jed Perl,* 50; **Theater:** Saints & sinners *by Donald Lyons,* 56

Books: *Henry Green* Surviving: the uncollected writings *reviewed by Brooke Allen,* 61; *Anthony Thwaite, editor* Selected letters of Philip Larkin *reviewed by Penelope Fitzgerald,* 68; *Richard Rodriguez* Days of obligation *reviewed by David Klinghoffer,* 70; *Jacqueline Rose* The haunting of Sylvia Plath *reviewed by Richard Tillinghast,* 74; *John Gross* The rise & fall of the man of letters *reviewed by Hilton Kramer,* 76; **Notebook:** The New Museum *by Michael Brandow,* 78

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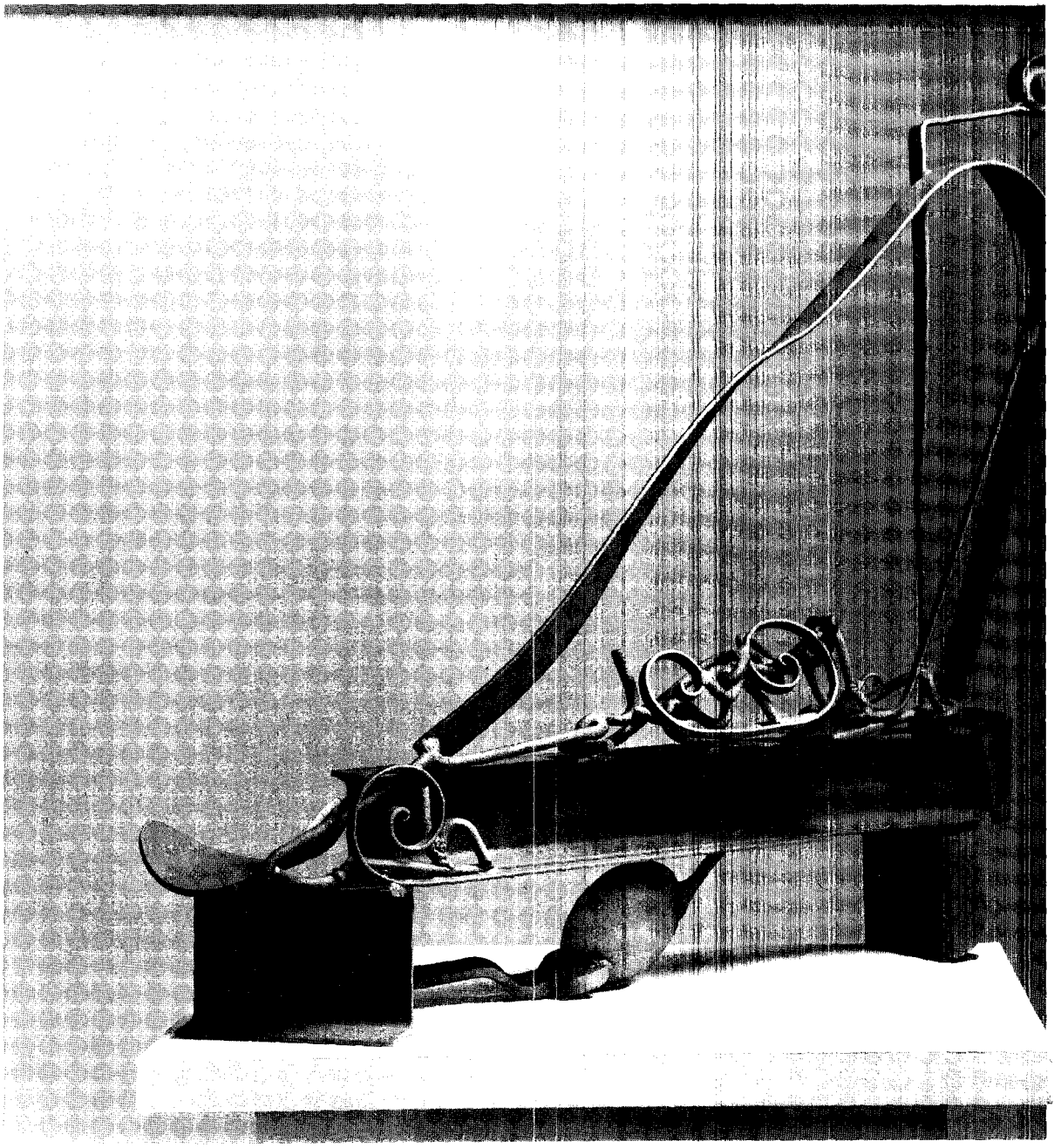

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The New Criterion *March 1993*

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Notes & Comments: March 1993

Matisse or Mapplethorpe: does it make any difference?

Among the many things written about the recent Matisse retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, none was more bizarre than the "Memo" to President Clinton that appeared in *The Nation* of February 1. Published on the occasion of the Inauguration festivities in Washington, which took place just after the Matisse show closed in New York, this "Dear Bill" memorandum was written by Arthur C. Danto, the Johnsonian Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University, who made his debut as the art critic of *The Nation* during the first Reagan administration. It was ostensibly a plea to the new incumbent at the White House "to declare your aesthetic allegiance now" and thus become "the Arts President." Yet what made this document at once so strange and so interesting had little to do with what we normally think of as politics. It was what this memorandum had to say about art and its public that made it so extraordinary.

Like many others who observed the immense public response to the Matisse retrospective, Professor Danto was moved to speculate about its significance. What he concluded was that it was "not the pursuit of pleasure that drove these crowds, nor was it aesthetic delectation." In his view, it was something akin to religious experience that the crowds had come in search of at the Matisse exhibition.

> They came to New York [Professor Danto wrote] for the express purpose of some mysterious communion with works they may not understand, because they view them as vehicles of the greatest spiritual meaning. . . . A people prepared to undergo hardships for the sake of art is clearly not one that thinks of art as frivolous, or elitist, or the pastime of their leisure moments, or an ornament of the cultivated life. They are there with the same drive and dedication that bring pilgrims to the shrine of Saint James in Santiago de Compostela.

If this sounds like too large a spiritual burden to be borne even by an artist as great as Matisse, it turned out that in Professor Danto's view Matisse was only an accidental accessory to the kind of spiritual pilgrimage that was being evoked for the benefit of our new President. True, art of some sort was deemed to be a necessary object or occasion for the kind of pilgrimage Professor Danto had in mind, but other artists were said to be able to perform the same spiritual function —Robert Mapplethorpe, for example, who may not stand as high in Professor Danto's pantheon of artistic geniuses as Andy Warhol, say, but who is nonetheless a special favorite of this philosopher-critic. Thus, in his "Dear Bill" memorandum to the President, Professor Danto wrote:

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> My sense is that much the same pilgrim spirit would disclose itself were the Museum of Modern Art to mount a show of the artist the enemies of art in our country have made world-famous, Robert Mapplethorpe. They would not be there, for the most part, with prurient appetites or moralistic attitudes, or even because they are interested in what makes for good photography. . . . No: They would be there, like those who came to see Matisse, because they believe art confers a meaning on their lives and that their lives would be infinitely poorer for its absence.

There are several things to be said about this remarkable claim. One, obviously, is that it totally negates the special aesthetic achievement of Matisse's art in its general assessment of the exhibition's appeal. According to this "spiritual" scenario, it hardly matters what kind of "meaning" art confers on our lives as long as a meaning of some sort can be attributed to the work. In recent years we have heard a lot about the question of quality in art, but this preposterous comparison of Mapplethorpe and Matisse goes further in its dismissal of the concept of quality than anything else we have seen. It also reduces the idea of the spiritual in art to something utterly facetious.

Another thing to be said about this claim is that it eliminates from the discussion the specific feature of Mapplethorpe's work that has made it a subject of widespread controversy—what Professor Danto has elsewhere approvingly called its "megaphallolatry." Perhaps out of deference to Presidential delicacy, Professor Danto makes no mention of what this "megaphallolatry" consists of in Mapplethorpe's photographs, nor is there any reference to the special sexual practices that are essential to this particular form of worship. Everything that is specific to Mapplethorpe's work simply gets subsumed in Professor Danto's invocation to some vague "Republic of the Arts."

Missing, too, from this discussion of Mapplethorpe is the political meaning of his work that Professor Danto insisted upon when he wrote about the photographer at the time of the Whitney Museum exhibition in 1988. "It seems clear to me that these photographs were political acts," Professor Danto wrote on that occasion, "and that they would not have been made as art were it not the intention to enlist art in some more critical transformation." It would certainly have been indelicate for Professor Danto to have spelled out for our new President the exact nature of the "critical transformation" he was referring to. The closest he could bring himself to speak of unspeakable things in his "Dear Bill" memorandum was to invoke the sacred cause of "pluralism," and then suggest that "we may be required by its ethics to support artistic values alien to our own." What makes certain artistic values "alien," however, sort of got lost in Professor Danto's upbeat concluding reference to "the aesthetic consciousness of mankind."

What was very touching about Professor Danto's memorandum was the way it continued to refer to "art" and "aesthetics" as if they could still be thought to exist. For he had made his reputation as an art critic by telling the world in article after article that the history of art had been effectively terminated when Andy Warhol produced his "Brillo Box" masterpieces, and that it is now permanently supplanted by what it pleased the Johnsonian Professor of Philosophy at Columbia to call—well, "philosophy." Yet here he was in his "Dear Bill" memorandum writing just as if art might still exist, after all. Perhaps it was the public nature of the occasion that made Professor Danto shy about imposing his arcane distinctions upon an aesthetic innocent. Or was it that in the aftermath of the Matisse retrospective he knew he would have sounded the fool if he had once again insisted that art had come to the end of its history?

As for his invitation to President Clinton "to declare your aesthetic allegiance now," Professor Danto seemed not to notice that in the Inauguration festivities in Washington, our new President had done precisely that.

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These Inauguration festivities were nothing if not a cultural statement, and I doubt that even Professor Danto, with his large tolerance for "pluralism," could have mistaken that statement for a spiritual pilgrimage.

Do we exaggerate?

For anyone interested in performing a reality check on life in academia these days, we recommend James W. Tuttleton's essay on Gerald Graff's new book, *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education*. Mr. Tuttleton's piece begins on page 28. Readers familiar with Professor Graff's recent lobbying on behalf of academic trendiness will not be surprised to discover that he has once again taken up his pen to complain that conservative critics of academia have got it all wrong, that they have simplified, exaggerated, distorted, and otherwise misrepresented the truth about intellectual life in the university.

But have conservative critics exaggerated the ills besetting the academy? "Gibberish" is a strong word. Yet over the years we have had occasion to cite many, many examples of politicized academic gibberish whose folly it would be difficult to exaggerate. Most of these specimens have come from the field of literary studies. It is important to understand, however, that the intellectual barbarism now rampant in the university is by no means confined to departments of English and comparative literature. Other fields —history, sociology, art history, etc.—are also besieged. An egregious but not, alas, atypical example from what has come to be called "cultural studies" arrived in our offices recently in the form of a new book about Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, the notorious couple who were convicted of passing atomic secrets to the Soviets in the early 1950s and then, in the face of great public outcry, were duly executed for treason.

The book, by one Virginia Carmichael, is called *Framing History: The Rosenberg Story and the Cold War*. It is part of a series on American culture published by the University of Minnesota Press. In a fulsome testimonial that appears on the book jacket, George Lipsitz, one of the series' editors, assures prospective readers that "Carmichael's use of historial sources and arguments is simply superb; indeed, it provides one of the most fully realized explanations for cold war anticommunism that I have encountered." Considered as an instrument of rhetorical evasion, the phrase "fully realized explanation" is splendid, for it relieves Mr. Lipsitz of the necessity of acknowledging the *best* explanation for Cold War anti-Communism—namely the brute historical fact of Communism itself. That is, anti-Communism flourished in the 1950s in response to the very real threat of Communist tyranny.

We know it sounds simple. And you can be sure that Miss Carmichael's "superb" study steers clear of any such explanation. Her book may be a pathetic congeries of fashionable lit-crit clichés; it may in fact be a tissue of stupidities and untruths; but no one can complain that it favors simple explanations. Consider, for example, Chapter 6, "Closure," which begins with a section entitled "Anal Logic and Masculist Society." Here's the opening paragraph:

> The emasculation figured and dramatized in *Public Burning* [Robert Coover's novel about the Rosenberg case] is not men's castration by women, even though gynophobia and misogyny pervasively characterize its masculist world; it is rather the degrading anal aggression of a violent penetration and occupation by the hegemonic masculine, getting fucked by masculist history and the masculist capitalist state. The threat and practice of this kind of political violence produce a nongendered emasculation that manifests itself as a kind of individual impotence before such invasive power; men, women, and childrern are all equally vulnerable, albeit within a hierarchy structured by class, race, and gender. As Uncle Sam says, "There ain't nothin' to fear but fear itself and a dry hole."

Do we exaggerate?

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Clement Greenberg & the Cold War

by Hilton Kramer

No art critic of our time has been the subject of more discussion than Clement Greenberg, who was born in 1909 and published the bulk of his critical writings between 1939 and 1969. Yet the nature of that discussion has at times been so contentious, not to say acrimonious, that the effect has been to obscure the virtues that made this criticism loom so large—and for so long a time—in the minds of both his admirers and his adversaries. It seems to me unlikely that the publication now of two further volumes of Mr. Greenberg's *Collected Essays and Criticism* will do much to alter this situation.[1] The academy, the museums, the media, the art journals, and a good deal of the intellectual press, not to mention foundations, corporate sponsors, and the cultural agencies of government, are now in the hands of apparatchiks who have a vested interest in defending both the kind of art and the kind of writing about art that Mr. Greenberg has famously deplored, and it is not to be expected that they will surrender their animus on the present occasion.

On the contrary, opposition is likely to be intensified, for the discussion of the issues raised in Mr. Greenberg's criticism is even more adamantly politicized today than it was in the days when he was still a regular contributor to critical opinion. In a culture now so largely dominated by ideologies of race, class, and gender, where the doctrines of multiculturalism and political correctness have consigned the concept of quality in art to the netherworld of invidious discrimination and all criticism tends to be judged according to its conformity to current political orthodoxies, even to suggest—as Mr. Greenberg's writings invariably do—that aesthetic considerations be given priority in the evaluation of art is to invite the most categorical disapprobation.

So rapidly has the radicalization of critical opinion accelerated in the past decade that in the seven years that have elapsed since the publication of the first two volumes of *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, the editor in charge of this otherwise exemplary edition of Mr. Greenberg's writings—John O'Brian, now professor of art history at the University of British Columbia—has clearly felt obliged to abandon the politically neutral tone he brought to the presentation of the earlier volumes and to adopt a more belligerent voice for the later volumes. No doubt this is due, in part, to the shift that occurred in Mr. Greenberg's own political views over the course of his critical career, and in even larger

1 *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, edited by John O'Brian. *Volume 3: Affirmations and Refusals, 1950-1956* (305 pages) and *Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969* (341 pages); University of Chicago Press, $29.95 each. The first two volumes in the series, *Volume 1: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944* (270 pages) and *Volume 2: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949* (353 pages), are still available from Chicago, in paperback only, for $16.95 each.

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part to Mr. O'Brian's disapproval of that shift.

In his early years as a critic, Mr. Greenberg was a Trotskyist—which is to say, an anti-Stalinist Marxist—yet by the end of the Forties he had already described himself as an "ex- or disabused Marxist," and by the Fifties he had joined the ranks of the anti-Communist liberals. (Mr. O'Brian prefers to call the position of the latter "Kantian anti-Communism.") From the perspective of the academic Marxists who came out of the Sixties, this put Mr. Greenberg on the wrong side of the Cold War, making him politically suspect if not actually retrograde, and it is more or less from that perspective that Mr. O'Brian has written his introduction to the last two volumes of *The Collected Essays and Criticism*.

Hence the tremendous emphasis that Mr. O'Brian places on the Cold War as the principal influence on Mr. Greenberg's criticism in the Fifties and Sixties. The main charge is that an "acquiescence to the *Pax Americana* and its policies was accompanied by a corresponding shift in [Mr. Greenberg's] stance as a cultural critic." To support this charge, Mr. O'Brian dwells at some length on the long essay that Mr. Greenberg published in *Commentary* in 1953 under the title "The Plight of Our Culture," which is now reprinted in Volume 3. This is indeed an important essay that ought to be better known. It is not only the best response to T. S. Eliot's *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* that I know of, but also one of the most cogent analyses of the problem of democratic culture any critic has given us in the last forty years. Unfortunately, it is one of the odd features of this new edition of Mr. Greenberg's writings that Mr. O'Brian has allowed his own political animus to distort its meaning. My guess is that he was so concerned to bring his reading of Mr. Greenberg's later criticism into line with the political views of his friend and colleague Serge Guilbaut, the author of *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, that he scarcely noticed the degree of misrepresentation that such an effort required.

"In 'The Plight of Our Culture,'" Mr. O'Brian writes, Mr. Greenberg "revoked his earlier criticism of mass-circulation magazines and their blurring of distinctions between high and low culture." It is also claimed that "Greenberg deduced that the newly dominant culture of the middle classes had the capacity to resist dilution and adulteration by mass culture as well as produce what he still most desired: . . . 'formal culture with its infinity of aspects, its luxuriance, its large comprehension.'" For Mr. O'Brian, then, "the transformation in Greenberg's thinking was an about-face," and "in the space of a couple of years, pessimism about the culture of modernity had given way to optimism" for purely political reasons. "Thus Greenberg's Cold War politics and cultural optimism merged," he writes, and this "ex- or disabused Marxist" is now said to have joined other New York intellectuals in believing that "democracy and capitalism . . . already were demonstrating what might be accomplished in the realm of middlebrow culture."

All of this suggests, of course, that "The Plight of Our Culture" is a rousing, politically inspired apology for middlebrow culture, and hence a retreat from Mr. Greenberg's vigorous defense of high culture in his classic essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," first published in 1939 and reprinted in Volume 1 of *The Collected Essays and Criticism*. Yet, in fact, "The Plight of Our Culture" is one of the most thoughtful and categorical indictments of middlebrow culture any American has ever given us. Far from representing an "about-face" on the imperatives of high culture, this very dour analysis of its fate under the pressures of democracy and capitalism puts a good deal of the blame for its problematic condition on the corrupting force of middlebrow culture. What does make "The Plight of Our Culture" different from "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" is its refusal to formulate its subject in orthodox Marxist terms (though Marxist thought still exerts a considerable influence on its analysis of culture) and its acknowledgment of the changes that had lately occurred in the relation of

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middlebrow culture to high art.[2] Yet to characterize this examination of middlebrow culture as "optimistic" requires a suspension of attention to its most salient points, if not indeed a flight of ideological fancy.

"The Plight of Our Culture" occupies some thirty pages in the new edition of Mr. Greenberg's writings, and cannot therefore be summarized in its totality. But here, anyway, are some of the relevant passages from Mr. Greenberg's analysis of middlebrow culture:

> The liberal and fine arts of tradition, as well as its scholarship, have been "democratized"—simplified, streamlined, purged of whatever cannot be made easily accessible, and this in large measure by the same rationalizing, "processing," and "packaging" methods by which industrialism has already made lowbrow culture a distinctive product of itself. Almost all types of knowledge and almost all forms of art are stripped, digested, synopsized, "surveyed," or abridged. The result achieved in those who patronize this kind of capsulated culture is, perhaps, a respect for culture as such, and a kind of knowingness, but it has very little to do with higher culture as something lived.
>
> The middlebrow in us wants the treasures of civilization for himself, but the desire is without appetite. . . . A sense of continuity with the past, a continuity at least of truth, of enduring relevance, belongs to a genuine culture almost by definition, but this is precisely what the middlebrow does not acquire. . . . He might be able to do so, eventually, by exerting humility and patience, but these he is somehow never able to muster in the face of culture. In his reading, no matter how much he wants to edify himself, he will balk at anything that sends him to the dictionary or a reference book more than once. (Curiosity without energy or tenacity is a middlebrow trait wherever and in whomever it appears.) Towards his entertainment, no matter how much he wants it to be "significant" and "worthwhile," he will become recalcitrant if the "significance" is not labeled immediately and obviously, and if too many conditioned reflexes are left without appropriate stimuli. What the middlebrow, even more conspicuously than the lowbrow, wants most is to have his expectations filled exactly as he expects to have them filled.
>
> Middlebrow culture, because of the way in which it is produced, consumed, and transmitted, reinforces everything else in our present civilization that promotes standardization and inhibits idiosyncrasy, temperament, and strong-mindedness; it functions as order and

---

2 Still, there was much in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" that did not belong to Marxism, and much, too, that is perfectly consistent with the view of high art to be found in "The Plight of Our Culture" and all the later criticism. For example:

> . . . it is true that once the avant-garde had succeded in "detaching" itself from society, it proceeded to turn around and repudiate revolutionary as well as bourgeois politics. The revolution was left inside society, a part of that welter of ideological struggle which art and poetry find so unpropitious as soon as it begins to involve those "precious" axiomatic beliefs upon which culture thus far has had to rest. Hence it developed that the true and most important function of the avant-garde was not to "experiment," but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture *moving* in the midst of ideological confusion and violence. Retiring from public altogether, the avant-garde poet or artist sought to maintain the high level of his art by both narrowing and raising it to the expression of an absolute in which all relativities and contradictions would be either resolved or beside the point. "Art for art's sake" and "pure poetry" appear, and subject matter or content becomes something to be avoided like a plague.
>
> It has been in search of the absolute that the avant-garde has arrived at "abstract" or "nonobjective" art—and poetry, too. The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely in its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape—not its picture—is aesthetically valid; something *given*, increate, independent of meanings, similars or originals. Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself.

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> organization but without ordering or organizing. In principle, it cannot master and preserve fresh experience or express and form that which has not already been expressed and formed. Thus it fails, like lowbrow culture, to accomplish what is, perhaps, the most important task of culture for people who live in a changing, *historical* society: it cannot maintain continuity in the face of novelty, but must always forget and replace its own products.

As for the relation that obtains between high culture and middlebrow "standardization," Mr. Greenberg can hardly be said to take an optimistic view. "High culture, however—authentic, disinterested culture—has so far suffered more than it has gained in the process," he writes. And his characterization of popular culture doesn't offer much of a basis for optimism, either:

> At the same time lowbrow, "machine," commercial culture is there everywhere to offer its relief to all those who find any sort of higher culture too much of an effort—lowbrow culture being powerful not only because it is "easy" and still suits the majority, but also because it has replaced folk culture as the culture of *all* childhood, and thereby become our "natural," "autochthonous" culture. (And, unlike folk culture, lowbrow culture neither contributes—at least not fundamentally—to high culture nor effaces itself in its social presence.)

You may, if you like, call this optimism or an "about-face" or—what is really implied by the charge—Cold War propaganda, but it sounds both pretty grim and pretty accurate to me, and not exactly a cheerleader's view of either capitalism or democracy.

It is also true that Mr. Greenberg acknowledges that "like lowbrow culture, middlebrow culture is not all of a piece," that "the good and the bad are mixed," and that middlebrow art "is not wholly adulteration and dilution." This, too, strikes me as true, at least for the time in which it was written, but not to offer much solace. Really, the only thing that Mr. Greenberg found to admire in "the middlebrow's respect for culture" was, as he wrote, that "it has worked to save the traditional facilities of culture—the printed word, the concert, lecture, museum, etc.—from that complete debauching which the movies, radio, and television have suffered under lowbrow and advertising culture." Yet anyone reading this passage in the 1990s must be aware of how much more has been surrendered by these "traditional facilities of culture" to the demands of lowbrow, popular culture over the last forty years. But even forty years ago, when our institutions of high culture had not yet sunk to their present levels, Mr. Greenberg's view of even this development was anything but rosy:

> But doesn't the damage still outweigh the gains [he asked], and can any amount of improvement at the lower levels compensate for deterioration at the highest, where the most authentic manifestations still have their being, where the forms and values of every other level originate—no matter how perverted subsequently—and where our experience is still most significantly and enduringly preserved?

As the passages I have quoted from "The Plight of Our Culture" attest, this is an essay that raises fundamental questions about the fate of high art in our society. They are the kind of questions, moreover, that have acquired an even greater urgency today when the middlebrow culture described by Mr. Greenberg in 1953 has been largely gutted of whatever virtues that could once be claimed for it and, for both political and commercial reasons, is now effectively supplanted by something much worse. (See, for an egregious example, Tina Brown's *New Yorker*.) For Mr. O'Brian to reduce these questions to a highly simplified scenario of Cold War politics not only misrepresents the content of "The Plight of Our Culture" but renders it irrelevant to our current cultural concerns—which is, to say the least, a curious policy for the editor of these books to pursue.

What Mr. O'Brian clearly cannot forgive is that Mr. Greenberg had taken the anti-Com-

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munist side in the early stages of the Cold War, and, as he writes, "remained committed to the Cold War agenda of the U.S. government." This is the "original sin" that for Mr. O'Brian has left an ineradicable taint upon everything that has been gathered in Volumes 3 and 4 of this *Collected Essays and Criticism*, right down to its last pages. For "in 1969," he writes, in what turns out to be the closing item in Volume 4, Mr. Greenberg "conducted a lengthy interview with Lily Leino for dissemination by the U.S. Information Agency, the umbrella organization for the Voice of America." I frankly rejoice that someone in the USIA bureaucracy had the brains to ask a writer of Mr. Greenberg's distinction to speak on the Voice of America broadcasts, but for Mr. O'Brian it remains a mark of the writer's contract with the Devil.

And what sort of thing was Mr. Greenberg broadcasting for the Voice of America in 1969? Recalling a period twenty-five years before "when everybody was so sure that Americans couldn't produce art of any consequence—and that included Americans themselves," Mr. Greenberg was, among other things, complaining that

> a lot of inferior art is taken seriously all over the world. It's a paradoxical situation when someone like Rauschenberg—who's nowhere nearly as good as Eakins, Homer, Ryder, or the early John Sloan, or Milton Avery, not to mention Marin—is viewed a major figure because of the credit American art in general now enjoys in the world.

He also had some praise for Andrew Wyeth! But it was probably this sort of thing that Mr. O'Brian found particularly offensive:

> I've seen some contemporary Soviet art, and as far as I can tell, art in the Soviet Union is controlled by Philistines. The same appears to be true in China and in every other place where Bolsheviks are in power. I call them Bolsheviks instead of Communists because I feel that that's more accurate, more specific. "Socialism" in backward countries means Bolshevism—Stalinism, if you want—and that means something barbaric, because "socialism" in a backward environment becomes, among other things, an aggressive expression of backwardness.

Some of us knew that all this was perfectly true when Mr. Greenberg made his broadcast in 1969, and now all the world knows it was true. Yet because he spoke the truth under U.S. government auspices, Mr. O'Brian apparently finds it tainted. That is indeed the triumph of ideology over veracity.

There is no question but that the Cold War played a significant role in shaping American cultural life in the decade and a half that followed the end of World War II , and that ex-radical intellectuals of Mr. Greenberg's generation made an important contribution to the formulation of that role. I said as much more than thirty years ago when Mr. Greenberg's first book of essays, *Art and Culture*, was published, and Mr. O'Brian accurately quotes me to that effect. "To understand *Art and Culture* is to understand a great deal about the artistic values that came out of the war and the Cold War years," I wrote in *Arts Magazine* in October 1962; "to question it is to question some of the salient achievements and aesthetic beliefs of those years."

What is so curious and distorting about Mr. O'Brian's characterization of Mr. Greenberg's role in this intellectual history is that he leaves the "salient achievements" of the Cold War period—which means, in this context, the Abstract Expressionist movement—unquestioned while at the same time endeavoring to reduce the "aesthetic beliefs of those years" to a purely political scenario. It is in this respect as well as others that he reveals his loyalty to the radical politics of the Sixties, with its anti-American paranoia, its sentimentalization of Marxist ideology, and its adamant refusal to acknowledge the moral superiority of American democracy over Soviet tyranny.

For what, after all, was the Cold War about if not the conflict between American (and Western) democracy and Soviet tyranny? Mr. O'Brian is not, to be sure, one of

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those nut cases who attempt to demonstrate that the fame and influence of Jackson Pollock was the creation of Nelson Rockefeller and John Foster Dulles and that even Harry Truman had somehow contrived to promote the interests of American abstract painting even while going through the motions of condemning it. He leaves the ideological dirty work to Serge Guilbaut and the cadres of radical art historians who have now succeeded in portraying the achievements of the New York School as nothing but a tainted product of America's role in the Cold War. Yet what he has given us in a large part of his introduction to Volumes 3 and 4 of Mr. Greenberg's *Collected Essays and Criticism* is a somewhat more respectable and respectful version of the same ideological narrative.

There is no way to understand what in 1962 I spoke of as "the salient achievements and aesthetic beliefs" of the war and the Cold War period without some acknowledgment of the lethal effects that Stalinist influence had on American art and culture in the 1930s. The Stalinist-inspired Popular Front culture of the Thirties was, in all its essentials, an irredeemably Philistine and middlebrow culture, and it laid upon the arts in this country a curse of mediocrity and sentimentality from which it did not begin to recover until the 1940s. (That is the reason why William Faulkner and Wallace Stevens were dismissed as reactionary eccentrics in the Thirties while Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton were acclaimed as geniuses.) If there is a serious criticism to be made of Mr. Greenberg's essay "The Plight of Our Culture," it would have to do with his failure to acknowledge the extent to which the middlebrow culture of the Forties and early Fifties had been fashioned in the Popular Front culture of the Thirties.

In its artistic and cultural interests, this was one of the things that Trotskyism set out to combat in the Thirties, and it was out of that conflict that Mr. Greenberg wrote his essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" in 1939. But even stripped of its Stalinist distortions, the Marxism of the Thirties proved to be a poor guide to what was actually happening in American art in the Forties, and it is much to Mr. Greenberg's credit that he recognized the change for what it was. (By the same token, it is much to Mr. O'Brian's discredit that he still doesn't.) This was the political drama that was made manifest in virtually every area of postwar American cultural life. Whereas in the early plays of Arthur Miller, for example, you see the middlebrow sentimentalism of the Popular Front mind reenacted with a vengeance, in the criticism of Lionel Trilling you see the attempt to liberate literary and social thought from its corrupting influence. It is in that context that Clement Greenberg's criticism of the Fifties and Sixties needs to be understood, and it is a sad commentary on the intellectual life of the 1990s that the editor of this fine edition of *The Collected Essays and Criticism* still doesn't get it. Hence his determination to reduce every aesthetic idea, if not aesthetics itself, to a suspect political datum.

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The perversions of M. Foucault

by Roger Kimball

Since it is difficult, or rather impossible, to represent a man's life as entirely spotless and free from blame, we should use the best chapters in it to build up the most complete picture and regard this as the true likeness. Any errors or crimes, on the other hand, which may tarnish a man's career and may have been committed out of passion or political necessity, we should regard rather as a lapse from a particular virtue than as the products of some innate vice. We must not dwell on them too emphatically in our history, but should rather show indulgence to human nature for its inability to produce a character which is absolutely good and uncompromisingly dedicated to virtue.

—Plutarch, in the life of Cimon

I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order.

—Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*

Looking back on our arrogantly skeptical age, future historians are likely to regard the rebirth of hagiography in the 1980s and 1990s with bemused curiosity. For one thing, these decades witnessed a notable dearth of likely *hagioi* or saints available for the honor of such commemoration. Then, too, the debunking temper of our times is ill-suited—or so one would have thought—to the task of adulation. Yet James Miller's ambitious new biography of the French historian-philosopher Michel Foucault (né Paul-Michel, after his father) demonstrates that the will to idolize can triumph over many obstacles.

Foucault, who died of AIDS in June 1984 at the age of fifty-seven, has long been a darling of the same super-chic academic crowd that fell for deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, and other aging French imports. But where the deconstructionists specialize in the fruity idea that language refers only to itself (*il n'y a pas de hors texte*, in Derrida's now-famous phrase), Foucault's focus was Power. He came bearing the bad news in bad prose that every institution, no matter how benign it seems, is "really" a scene of unspeakable domination and subjugation; that efforts at enlightened reform—of asylums, of prisons, of society at large—have been little more than alibis for extending state power; that human relationships are, underneath it all, deadly struggles for mastery; that truth itself is merely a coefficient of coercion; &c., &c. "Is it surprising," Foucault asked in *Surveiller et punir* (English translation: *Discipline and Punish*, 1977), "that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?" Such "interrogations" were a terrific hit in the graduate seminar, of course. And Mr. Miller may well be right in claiming that by the time of his death Foucault was "perhaps the single most famous intellectual in the world"—famous, at least, in American universities, where hermetic arguments about sex and power are pursued with risible fecklessness by the hirsute and

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untidy. In all this, Foucault resembled his more talented rival and fellow left-wing activist, Jean-Paul Sartre, whose stunning career Foucault did everything he could to emulate, beginning with a stint in the French Communist Party in the early 1950s. He never quite managed it—he never wrote anything as original or philosophically significant as *Being and Nothingness*, never had the public authority that Sartre, alas, enjoyed in the postwar years. Yet he had eminent and devoted cheerleaders, including such well-known figures as the historian Paul Veyne, his colleague at the Collège de France, who declared Foucault "the most important event in the thought of our century."

Be that as it may, he remains an unlikely candidate for canonization. But the very title of this new biography—*The Passion of Michel Foucault* [1]—puts readers on notice that, in Mr. Miller's opinion, anyway, his subject presents us with a life of such exemplary, self-sacrificing virtue that it bears comparison with the Passion of Jesus Christ. (Nor is the reference to the Passion adventitious: Mr. Miller makes the connection explicit.) The eager reception of *The Passion of Michel Foucault* suggests that Mr. Miller, a prolific cultural journalist who teaches at the New School for Social Research, is not alone in his estimation. To be sure, there have been a few dissenting voices, mostly from academic homosexual activists who feel that Mr. Miller was insufficiently reverential. But most critics—including such luminaries as Alexander Nehamas, Richard Rorty, and Alasdair MacIntyre—have been falling over themselves to express their admiration and "gratitude" for Mr. Miller's performance.

What is novel about that performance is Mr. Miller's neglect of Plutarch's admonition, quoted above, that one ought to concentrate on "the best chapters" of a life and cover over "any crimes or errors" when writing about a great man. While this might be questionable advice for a biographer, for a hagiographer it would seem to be indispensable. Not that anyone familiar with the outlines of Foucault's life is likely to think him an angel. Mr. Miller describes him as a "new type of intellectual," "modest and without mystifying pretense." But this is at best disingenuous. True, Foucault occasionally indulged in some ritualistic false modesty before delivering a lecture or when disparaging earlier work in favor of his present enterprises. But as the French journalist Didier Eribon has shown in an earlier biography (and as Mr. Miller unwittingly shows in his own), arrogance and mystification were two hallmarks of Foucault's character and writing.[2] Eribon notes that at school, where Goya's horrific etchings of the victims of war decorated his walls, Foucault was "almost universally detested." Schoolmates remember him as brilliant, but also aloof, sarcastic, and cruel. He several times attempted—and more often threatened—suicide. Self-destruction, in fact, was another of Foucault's obsessions, and Mr. Miller is right to underscore Foucault's fascination with death. In this, as in so much else, he followed the lead of the Marquis de Sade, who had long been one of his prime intellectual and moral heroes. (Though, as Miller notes, Foucault felt that Sade "had not gone far enough," since, unaccountably, he continued to see the body as "strongly organic.") Foucault came to enjoy imagining "suicide festivals" or "orgies" in which sex and death would mingle in the ultimate anonymous encounter. Those planning suicide, he mused, could look "for partners without names, for occasions to die liberated from every identity."

Mr. Miller describes Foucault as "one of the representative men—and outstanding thinkers—of the twentieth century." But his great innovation in this book is to seize what was most vicious and perverted about Foucault—his addiction to sadomasochistic sexual practices—and to glorify it as a cour-

1 *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, by James Miller; Simon & Schuster, 491 pages, $27.50.

2 Didier Eribon's biography, *Michel Foucault*, was published in France in 1989. An English translation, by Betsy Wing, appeared from Harvard in 1991. See Richard Vine's review in the *The New Criterion* for January 1992.

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ageous new form of virtue—a specifically *philosophical* virtue, moreover. Note well: Mr. Miller does not attempt to excuse or condone or tolerate Foucault's vices; he does not, for instance, claim that they were the human, all-too-human foibles of a man who was nevertheless a great thinker. Such attitudes, after all, carry an implied criticism: we excuse only what requires exculpation; we tolerate only what makes demands upon our patience or broad-mindedness.[3] What we fully approve of we certify and celebrate; and celebration of Foucault and all he stood for is at the top of Mr. Miller's agenda in this book.

Mr. Miller claims that Foucault's penchant for sadomasochistic sex was itself an indication of admirable ethical adventurousness. Indeed, in his view, we should be grateful to Foucault for his pioneering exploration of hitherto forbidden forms of pleasure and consciousness. In his preface, Mr. Miller suggests that Foucault, "in his radical approach to the body and its pleasures, was in fact a kind of visionary; and that in the future, once the threat of AIDS has receded, men and women, both straight and gay, will renew, without shame or fear, the kind of corporeal experimentation that formed an integral part of his own philosophical quest." In other words, Mr. Miller attempts to enroll in the ranks of virtue behavior and attitudes that until fifteen minutes ago were universally condemned as pathological.

Many of his critics have cheerfully followed suit. For example, the prominent Nietzsche scholar Alexander Nehamas, in the course of his long and fulsome review of Mr. Miller's book for *The New Republic*, readily agrees that "sadomasochism was a kind of blessing in Foucault's life. It provided the occasion to experience relations of power as a source of delight." Consequently, Nehamas concludes, "Foucault extended the limits of what could count as an admirable human life." Again, Isabelle de Courtivron, head of the department of foreign languages and literatures at MIT, assures readers in a front-page review for *The New York Times Book Review* that Foucault "expanded modern knowledge in profoundly important and original ways." She then commends Mr. Miller "for dismissing cliché-ridden concepts about certain specific erotic practices, and for offering a clear and nonjudgmental (even supportive) analysis of the tools and techniques of what he considers a mutually consensual theater of cruelty."

A great deal might be said about this effort to welcome sadomasochism as a bracing new "life-style" option. Above all, perhaps, it demonstrates the kind of spiritual and intellectual wreckage that can result, even now—and even for the most educated minds—from the afterwash of the radicalism of the 1960s. Make no mistake: behind Professor de Courtivron's anodyne commendation of a "nonjudgmental" approach to human sexuality and Mr. Miller's dream of "corporeal experimentation" that proceeds "without shame or fear" stands the vision of polymorphous emancipation that helped turn the 1960s into the moral and political debacle it was. Among the many articulations of false freedom that sprouted in those years, none was more influential than Herbert Marcuse's Marxist-Freudian tract, *Eros and Civilization* (1966). Eagerly embraced by countercultural enthusiasts who wanted to believe that heating up their sex lives would hasten the demise of capitalism and bring forth the millennium, it outlines a portentous struggle between "the logic of domination" and the "will to gratification," attacks "the established reality in the name of the pleasure principle," and fulminates against "the repressive order of procreative sexuality." Very Foucauldian, all that. As indeed is Marcuse's splendid idea of "repressive tolerance," which holds that "what is proclaimed and practiced as tolerance today" —Marcuse was writing in

3 The eclipse of tolerance as a liberal virtue, by the way—the widespread belief that tolerance must now be considered a symptom of reaction—is one of the most insidious by-products of the campaign for political correctness. Among other things, it sharply narrows the space for open debate by requiring allegiance to values or ideas one had hitherto had the luxury of acknowledging without affirmation.

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1965 and had in mind such institutions as freedom of speech and freedom of assembly—"is in many of its most effective manifestations serving the cause of oppression." In plain Orwellian language: Freedom is tyranny, tyranny is freedom.

The aroma of such Sixties radicalism pervades Mr. Miller's book and everywhere undergirds his sympathy for Foucault. With this in view, it seems only natural that among Mr. Miller's other credits are *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll*, which he edited, and *"Democracy Is in the Streets": From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (1987). I am unfamiliar with the former work, but *"Democracy Is in the Streets"* is a straightforward paean to the New Left and its "collective dream" of "participatory democracy." In that book, Mr. Miller was already memorializing crucial "breakaway experiences"—"during sit-ins, in marches, at violent confrontations"—and the Sixties' "spirit of ecstatic freedom." In some ways, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* is a revival of that earlier book, done over with a French theme and plenty of black leather.

Hence it is not surprising that when Mr. Miller gets around to *les événements*, the student riots of 1968, his prose waxes dithyrambic as gratified nostalgia fires his imagination. It is as if he were reliving his lost—or maybe not-so-lost—childhood.

> The disorder was intoxicating. Billboards were ripped apart, sign posts uprooted, scaffolding and barbed wire pulled down, parked cars tipped over. Piles of debris mounted in the middle of the boulevards. The mood was giddy, the atmosphere festive. "Everyone instantly recognized the reality of their desires," one participant wrote shortly afterward, summing up the prevailing spirit. "Never had the passion for destruction been shown to be more creative."

Foucault himself, unfortunately, had to miss out on the first wave of riots, since he was teaching at the University of Tunis. But his lover Daniel Defert was in Paris and kept him abreast of developments by holding a transistor radio up to the telephone receiver for hours on end. Later that year, Foucault was named head of the department of philosophy at the newly created University of Vincennes outside Paris. The forty-three-year-old professor of philosophy then got a chance to abandon himself to the intoxication. In January 1969, a group of five hundred students seized the administration building and amphitheater, ostensibly to signal solidarity with their brave colleagues who had occupied the Sorbonne earlier that day. In fact, as Mr. Miller suggests, the real point was "to explore, again, the creative potential of disorder." Mr. Miller is very big on "the creative potential of disorder." Foucault was one of the few faculty who joined the students. When the police arrived, he followed the recalcitrant core to the roof in order to "resist." Mr. Miller reports proudly that while Foucault "gleefully" hurled stones at the police, he was nonetheless "careful not to dirty his beautiful black velour suit."

It was shortly after this encouraging episode that Foucault shaved his skull and emerged as a ubiquitous countercultural spokesman. His "politics" were consistently foolish, a combination of solemn chatter about "transgression," power, and surveillance, leavened by an extraordinary obtuseness about the responsible exercise of power in everyday life. Foucault was dazzled by the thought that the word "subject" (as in "the subject who is reading this") is cognate with "subjection." "Both meanings," he speculated, "suggest a form of power which subjugates or makes subject to." Foucault posed as a passionate partisan of liberty. At the same time, he never met a revolutionary piety he didn't like. He championed various extreme forms of Marxism, including Maoism; he supported the Ayatollah Khomeini, even when the Ayatollah's fundamentalist cadres set about murdering thousands of Iranian citizens. In 1978, looking back to the postwar period, he asked: "What could politics mean when it was a question of choosing between Stalin's USSR and Truman's America?" It tells us a great deal that Foucault found this question difficult to answer.

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One thing that is refreshing about Foucault's political follies, however, is that they tend to make otherwise outlandish figures appear comparatively tame. In a debate that aired on Dutch television in the early Seventies, for example, the famous American radical and linguist Noam Chomsky appears as a voice of sanity and moderation in comparison to Foucault. As Mr. Miller reports it, while Chomsky insisted "we must act as sensitive and responsible human beings," Foucault replied that such ideas as responsibility, sensitivity, justice, and law were merely "tokens of ideology" that completely lacked legitimacy. "The proletariat doesn't wage war against the ruling class because it considers such a war to be just," he argued. "The proletariat makes war with the ruling class because . . . it wants to take power."

Although he came of age in the 1940s and 1950s, the "public" Foucault was fundamentally a child of the Sixties: precocious, spoiled, self-absorbed, full of jejune political sentiments, wracked by unfulfillable fantasies of absolute ecstasy. He became expert at straining the narcissistic delusions of the Sixties through the forbidding, cynical argot of contemporary French philosophy. And it is primarily to this, I believe, that he owes his enormous success as an academic guru. In Foucault's philosophy, the "idealism" of the Sixties was painted a darker hue. But its demand for liberation from "every fixed form," as Mr. Miller repeatedly puts it, remained very much in force. In an interview from 1968, Foucault suggested that "the rough outline of a future society is supplied by the recent experiences with drugs, sex, communes, other forms of consciousness and other forms of individuality. If scientific socialism emerged from the *utopias* of the nineteenth century, it is possible that a real socialization will emerge in the 20th century from *experiences*."

Drugs, in fact, were one aid that Foucault freely availed himself of in his search for "experiences." He battened on hashish and marijuana in the Sixties, but it was not until 1975 that he had his first encounter with LSD. Mr. Miller considers it crucial to the philosopher's development, and so apparently did Foucault, who described it in what were clearly his highest words of praise. "The only thing I can compare this experience to in my life," he is reported to have said at the time, "is sex with a stranger. . . . Contact with a strange body affords an experience of the truth similar to what I am experiencing now." "I now understand my sexuality," he concluded. In light of Foucault's fate, it seems grimly significant that this pharmacological fête took place in Death Valley. In any event, so galvanizing was Foucault's first experience with hallucinogens that he set aside drafts of the unpublished volumes of *The History of Sexuality*—what a loss! As Miller notes, there were hundreds of pages "on masturbation, on incest, on hysteria, on perversion, on eugenics": all the important philosophical issues of our time.

Nineteen seventy-five was clearly Foucault's *annus mirabilis*. It marked not only his introduction to the pleasures of LSD, but also his first visit to California's Bay Area and introduction to San Francisco's burgeoning sadomasochistic subculture. Foucault had "experimented" with S&M before—indeed, his proclivities in this matter cost him his relationship with the composer Jean Barraqué. But he had never encountered anything so exorbitant as what San Francisco offered. According to Mr. Miller, the philosopher, now nearing his fiftieth birthday, found it "a place of dumbfounding excess that left him happily speechless." The city's countless homosexual bathhouses, he explained, allowed Foucault to grapple with his "lifelong fascination with 'the overwhelming, the unspeakable, the creepy, the stupefying, the ecstatic,' embracing 'a pure violence, a wordless gesture.'"

As always, Mr. Miller presents Foucault's indulgence in sexual torture as if it were a noble existential battle for greater wisdom and political liberation. Thus while sadomasochism is a topic that Mr. Miller discusses early and often, his fullest exploration of the subject comes in a chapter called, after the title of one of Foucault's books, "The

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Will to Know." "Accepting the new level of risk," Mr. Miller writes, Foucault

> joined again in the orgies of torture, trembling with "the most exquisite agonies," voluntarily effacing himself, exploding the limits of consciousness, letting real, corporeal pain insensibly melt into pleasure through the alchemy of eroticism. . . . Through intoxication, reverie, the Dionysian abandon of the artist, the most punishing of ascetic practices, and an uninhibited exploration of sadomasochistic eroticism, it seemed possible to breach, however briefly, the boundaries separating the conscious and unconscious, reason and unreason, pleasure and pain—and, at the ultimate limit, life and death—thus starkly revealing how distinctions central to the play of true and false are pliable, uncertain, contingent.

Much of the time, Mr. Miller appears as a sober investigative journalist. But just mention the word "transcendence" and he goes all gooey. I suspect it's a reflex, acquired from too much Alan Watts and other quasi-mystical confections. Just as Pavlov's dog could not help salivating when he heard the bell ring, so Mr. Miller can't help spouting nonsense whenever anyone mentions Dionysus.

Noting sadly that we may "never know" exactly what Foucault did while exploding the limits of consciousness and effacing the boundaries between pleasure and pain, Mr. Miller is nevertheless gruesomely particular in his descriptions of the sadomasochistic underworld that Foucault frequented, a world that featured, among other attractions, "gagging, piercing, cutting, electric-shocking, stretching on racks, imprisoning, branding. . . ." "Depending on the club," he dutifully reports, "one could savor the illusion of bondage—or experience the most directly physical sorts of self-chosen 'torture.'" Foucault threw himself into this scene with an enthusiasm that astonished his friends, quickly acquiring an array of leather clothes and, "for play," a variety of clamps, handcuffs, hoods, gags, whips, paddles, and other "sex toys."

Mr. Miller's discussion of sadomasochism is certainly grotesque; it is also comical at times. Despite everything, Mr. Miller is a careful and diligent scholar, and so he feels obliged to supply readers with a full list of sources. In his compendious notes, he informs us that his discussion is based on such works as "The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole," *Urban Aboriginals: A Celebration of Leathersexuality*, and *The New Leatherman's Workbook: A Photo Illustrated Guide to* SM *Sex Devices*. "For the techniques of gay S/M in these years," he explains, "I have relied on Larry Townshend, *The Leatherman's Handbook II*." It's the deadpan delivery that does it.

Unintended comedy aside, however, Mr. Miller's whole depiction of sadomasochism is a maze of contradictions, veering wildly between the worst sort of pop psycho-babble and pompous "philosophical" sermonizing. Addicted to countercultural platitudes about sexual liberation and psychic emancipation, he can't understand why "S/M is still one of the most widely stigmatized of sexual practices." Still, after all these years! On the one hand, to help overcome the stigma, he is desperate to de-toxify the subject, to make the perversion seem "generally benign" and normal. On the other hand, he also feels constrained to present the practice of sexual torture as something brave, "exploratory," and "challenging." The whips and chains are really just "props"; the encounters are "consensual"; the pain is "often mild"; the devotees of S&M are, "on the whole, . . . as nonviolent and well-adjusted as any other segment of the population." But even as he is telling us about the the pillows he found in an S&M "dungeon" to make it cozy, he also quotes the expert who, while insisting that "the real trip is mental," freely acknowledges that "there is certainly pain and sometimes a small amount of blood." Only a small amount, though.

One of Mr. Miller's frequent explanatory strategies involves a trip down the slippery slope. When was the last time you had a violent impulse? Well, then: aren't we all closet sadists? "After all," Mr. Miller argues, "S/M on one level merely makes explicit the sadistic and masochistic fantasies implicitly

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at play in most, perhaps all, human relationships." Ah yes, "on one level." It never seems to occur to Mr. Miller that, even if it were true that such fantasies were "implicitly" at play in most human relationships (itself a dubious proposition), the difference between "implicit" and "explicit" is exactly the difference upon which the entire world of moral behavior is based. Furthermore, the question of "relationships" hardly enters, for as Foucault himself stressed, the anonymity of the encounters formed a large part of their attraction: "You meet men [in the clubs] who are to you as you are to them: nothing but a body with which combinations and productions of pleasure are possible. You cease to be imprisoned in your own face, in your own past, in your own identity."

Even Mr. Miller recognizes—though he doesn't come right out and say it—that at the center of Foucault's sexual obsessions was not the longing for philosophical insight but the longing for oblivion. "Complete total pleasure," Foucault correctly observed, is "related to death." The unhappy irony is that this apostle of sex and hedonism should have wound up, like the Marquis de Sade before him, exiling pleasure from sex. In one of the innumerable interviews that he gave in later years, Foucault praised sadomasochism as "a creative enterprise, which has as one of its main features what I call the desexualization of pleasure." What is pathetically revealing is Foucault's belief that this was an argument *for* sadomasochism. He continued: "The idea that bodily pleasure should always come from sexual pleasure, and the idea that sexual pleasure is the root of *all* our possible pleasure—I think *that's* something quite wrong." Well yes, Michel, there is something quite wrong about that. But who believes that "bodily pleasure should always come from sexual pleasure"? Had a good meal lately? Enjoyed a walk in the sunshine? It is part of the relentless logic of sadomasochism that what begins as a single-minded cultivation of sexual pleasure for its own sake ends by extinguishing the capacity for enjoying pleasure altogether. Indeed, it might be said that the pursuit of ever more extreme sensations of pleasure, which stands at the heart of the sadomasochistic enterprise, drains the pleasure out of pleasure. The desire for oblivion ends up in the oblivion of desire.

Foucault's sexual adventures in the early 1980s also inevitably raise the question of AIDS. Did Foucault know he had the disease? Mr. Miller engages in a fair amount of handwringing over this question. He begins by saying no, Foucault probably didn't know. But he also quotes Daniel Defert, who thought his friend "had a real knowledge" that he had AIDS. "When he went to San Francisco for the last time, he took it as a *limit-experience*." This puts Mr. Miller in a tough position. He thinks that "limit experiences" are by definition a good thing. "It is not immoral to be convulsed by singular fantasies and wild impulses," he writes, summarizing the "ethical" point of Foucault's book *Madness and Civilization*: "such limit-experiences are to be valued as a way of winning back access to the occluded, Dionysian dimension of being human." But what if pursuing the limit involves infecting other people with a deadly disease? What if the pursuit of some "limit experiences" implicates one in what amounts to homicidal behavior? In the end, Mr. Miller waffles. He is all for allowing those who "think differently" to engage in "potential suicidal acts of passion" with consenting partners. But homicidal acts? It is pretty clear, in any event, what Foucault himself thought. As he put it in Volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, "The Faustian pact, whose temptation has been instilled in us by the deployment of sexuality, is now as follows: to exchange life in its entirety for sex itself, for the truth and the sovereignty of sex. Sex is worth dying for."

Foucault is admired above all for practicing an exemplary suspicion about the topics he investigated. He is supposed to have been a supreme intellectual anatomist, ruthlessly laying bare the hidden power relations, dark motives, and ideological secrets that infect bourgeois society and that fester unacknowledged in the hearts and minds of everyone. It is curious, though, that Fou-

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cault's acolytes bring so little suspicion to the master's own claims. Consider the central Foucauldian contention that objective truth is a "chimera," that truth is always and everywhere a function of power, of "multiple forms of constraint." Some version of this claim is propagated as gospel by academics across the country. But wait: is it *true*? Is it in fact the case that truth is always relative to a "regime of truth," i.e., to politics? If one says: Yes, it is true, then one plunges directly into contradiction—for haven't we just dispensed with this naïve idea of truth?—and the logical cornerstone of Foucault's epistemology crumbles.

Or consider the proposition that Michel Foucault is a kind of latter-day avatar of Friedrich Nietzsche. It is not so much argued as taken for granted that Foucault, like Nietzsche, was the very epitome of the lonely but profound philosophical hero, thinking thoughts too deep—and too dangerous—for most of us. (Except of course for Foucault's followers: for *them* it is the work of a moment to dispense with "Western metaphysics," "bourgeois humanism," and a thousand other evils.) Foucault himself assiduously promoted the idea that he was a modern-day Nietzsche, and Mr. Miller has elevated the comparison into a central interpretive principle. In his preface, he announces that his book is not so much a biography as an account "of one man's lifelong struggle to honor Nietzsche's gnomic injunction, 'to become what one is.'" Never mind that thirty pages later we find Foucault insisting that "One writes to become someone other than who one is": the Foucault industry thrives on such "paradoxes." Anyway, who has time for such niceties as logic when engaged on a risky "Nietzschean quest," something we find Foucault pursuing in Mr. Miller's book every fifty pages or so?

In fact, the comparison between Foucault and Nietzsche is a calumny upon Nietzsche. Admittedly, Nietzsche has a lot to answer for, including the popularity of figures like Foucault. But whatever one thinks of Nietzsche's philosophy and influence, it is difficult not to admire his courage and single-minded commitment to the philosophical life. Wracked by ill-health—migraines, vertigo, severe digestive complaints—Nietzsche had to quit his teaching position at the University of Basel when he was in his mid-thirties. From then on he led an isolated, impoverished, celibate life, subsisting in various cheap *pensioni* in Italy and Switzerland. He had but few friends. His work was almost totally ignored: *Beyond Good and Evil*, one of his most important books, sold a total of 114 copies in a year. Yet he quietly persevered.

And Foucault? After attending the most elite French schools—the lycée Henri IV, the Ecole Normale Supérieure, the Sorbonne—he held a series of academic appointments in France, Poland, Germany, Sweden, and Tunisia. The jobs were low-paying, but the budding philosopher was aided in his program of resistance by generous subsidies from his parents. In the 1950s, when he was a lowly instructor at the University of Uppsala, he acquired what Didier Eribon calls "a magnificent beige Jaguar" (it is white in Mr. Miller's book) and proceeded to drive "like a madman" around town, shocking staid Uppsalian society. Talk about challenging convention! Eribon reminds us, too, that Foucault was an accomplished academic politician, adept at securing preferment for himself and his friends. This is not to say that he concealed his contempt for narrow, bourgeois scruples, however. Attempting suicide and hurling stones at the police were hardly his only efforts to "transgress" accepted academic protocol. While he was teaching at Clermont-Ferrand in the early 1960s, for example, he gave an assistanceship to his lover, Daniel Defert. In response to a faculty-council query about why he had appointed Defert rather than another applicant, a woman who was older and better qualified, he replied: "Because we don't like old maids here." Moreover, Foucault enjoyed the esteem of gullible intellectuals everywhere. His book *Les Mots et les choses* (*The Order of Things* in English) became a best-seller in 1966, catapulting him to international fame. The crowning recognition came in 1970 when, at the unusually young age of forty-four, Fou-

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cault was elected to the Collège de France, the very pinnacle of French academic culture. Mr. Miller, like most academics who write about Foucault, praises Foucault's philosophical daring and willingness to put himself at risk for his ideas. "For more than a decade," Mr. Miller writes about Foucault's reputation at the time of his death, "his elegant shaved skull had been an emblem of political courage—a cynosure of resistance to institutions that would smother the free spirit and stifle the 'right to be different.'" Ah yes, what resistance to bourgeois society!

But Foucault differed from Nietzsche in more than such outward trappings. The fundamental world outlooks of the two men were radically different. Basically, Foucault was Nietzsche's ape. He adopted some of Nietzsche's rhetoric about power and imitated some of his verbal histrionics. But he never achieved anything like Nietzsche's insight or originality. Nietzsche may have been seriously wrong in his understanding of modernity: he may have mistaken one part of the story—the rise of secularism—for the whole tale; but few men have struggled as honestly with the problem of nihilism as he. Foucault simply flirted with nihilism as one more "experience." Mr. Miller is right to emphasize the importance of "experience," especially extreme or "limit" experience, in Foucault's life and work; he is wrong to think that this was a virtue. Foucault was addicted to extremity. He epitomized to perfection a certain type of decadent Romantic, a type that Nietzsche warned against when he spoke of "those who suffer from the *impoverishment of life* and seek rest, stillness, calm seas, redemption from themselves through art and knowledge, or intoxication, convulsions, anaesthesia, and madness." Foucault's insatiable craving for new, ever more thrilling "experiences" was a sign of weakness, not daring. Here, too, Nietzsche is a far better guide than Foucault. "All men now live through too much and think through too little," Nietzsche wrote in 1880. "They suffer at the same time from extreme hunger and from colic, and therefore become thinner and thinner, no matter how much they eat.—Whoever says now, 'I have not lived through anything'—is an ass."

Mr. Miller is not entirely uncritical. About *Madness and Civilization* (English translation, 1971), for example, he acknowledges that "the author's own convictions are insinuated more than argued." About *The Order of Things*, he points out that the writing is "awkward, disjointed, elliptical to a fault." But such local criticisms do not go nearly far enough. At the beginning of his book, Mr. Miller mentions in passing J. G. Merquior's incisive critical study, *Foucault* (1985). Readers acquainted with that book know that Merquior, who is identified as "a Brazilian diplomat who studied with Ernest Gellner," has politely but definitively exploded almost every significant claim that Foucault made. Merquior typically begins each chapter with a ritual nod to Foucault's brilliance. He then proceeds to show that his arguments rest on shoddy, if extensive, scholarship, distorted history, and untenable generalizations. Whatever "new perspectives" Foucault's work may have opened up, Merquior concludes, its "conceptual muddles and explanatory weaknesses . . . more than outweigh its real contribution." The truth is, Foucault specialized in providing obfuscating answers to pseudo problems. "We have had sexuality since the eighteenth century, and sex since the nineteenth," he writes in *The History of Sexuality*. "What we had before that was no doubt flesh." Yes, and "Sexual intercourse was invented in 1963," as Philip Larkin memorably put it.

Foucault once described his writing as a "labyrinth." He was right. The question is, why should we wish to enter it? It may be the case that, as Mr. Miller insists, Foucault's writing expresses "a powerful desire to realize a certain form of life." But is it a *desirable* form of life? Foucault's personal perversions involved him in private tragedy. The celebration of his intellectual perversions by academics continues to be a public scandal. The career of this "representative man" of the twentieth century really represents one of the biggest con jobs in recent intellectual history.

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The enduring V. S. Pritchett

by Joseph Epstein

Sooner or later, the great men turn out to be all alike. They never stop working. They never lose a minute. It is very depressing.
—V. S. Pritchett on Edward Gibbon

"The Age of Criticism," Randall Jarrell called the literary life of his own day, in an essay of that title written in the early 1950s. Jarrell used the phrase in derogation: there was too much criticism, from his point of view, and too much of it was extravagant in its pretensions. From the standpoint of today, however, that age is beginning to look more and more admirable. At the time T. S. Eliot, Edmund Wilson, F. R. Leavis, and Lionel Trilling were working at the critic's trade; so were John Crowe Ransom, William Empson, Yvor Winters, and Randall Jarrell himself, and to these one could, without too much strain, add another score or so of fairly impressive names.

Although born in 1900, and very much in his prime at the time of Randall Jarrell's essay, V. S. Pritchett's is not a name that many people would have included among the important figures from the Age of Criticism. For one thing, he didn't have a job at a university—he hadn't, come to that, even attended a university. For another, he had no interest in the theoretical or even disputatious aspects of literature: he wrote, that is to say, without an argument or a case to make. And for a third, he made his living from his writing, publishing (most frequently in *The New Statesman*) two-thousand-or-so-word book reviews every week, supplementing these with a steady production of travel books, fiction, and biographical literary studies. In the Age of Criticism, Pritchett would have been called, with a slight air of put-down, a reviewer, or, only a touch more generously, a literary journalist.

Perhaps Pritchett's problem had to do with the fact that writing criticism, as practiced at the highest levels, is in some quarters regarded rather like making love: it is not thought quite proper to do it for money. V. S. Pritchett is a professional writer. At an earlier time, he would have been known as a man of letters, and John Gross, in the afterword to the new edition of his *Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters*, remarks that "no living man of letters had a better claim to be included" in his book than V. S. Pritchett. In fact, Pritchett was still very much in full sail when the first edition of Mr. Gross's book appeared in 1969. *A Cab at the Door*, the first of Pritchett's autobiographical volumes, had only just been announced—he would later write a second such volume, *Midnight Oil*—and much Pritchettian prose would flow under the bridge between then and now. The fluvial metaphor is perhaps allowable, since V. S. Pritchett has himself become something like the Ol' Man River of contemporary English literature: now in his early nineties, he jus' keeps rollin', he keeps on rollin' along. In the recently pubished second volume of his autobiography, *You've Had Your Time*, Anthony Burgess mentions seeing "an an-

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cient but thriving Victor Pritchett." To put Pritchett's age in perspective, it helps to know that he read Virginia Woolf's books when they were just out.

To commemorate his achievement, perhaps also to mark his endurance, Pritchett's publishers, both in England and in the United States, have recently issued two thick volumes of his work: the *Complete Collected Stories*[1] and the *Complete Collected Essays*;[2] the latter, more precisely, turns out to be the collected literary criticism. Taken together, these two books run to nearly 2,500 pages and weigh in, on our family French cooking scale, at just over seven pounds. These books, neither of which comes with an introduction or a prefatory word from their author or anyone else, are clearly meant as a tribute and one that provides the occasion to consider the now all-but-rounded-out career of a remarkable writer.

V. S. Pritchett is both a throwback and an oddity. He is a throwback to a time when, in England, one could write about literature with the assumption that there was no need to teach or preach to your readers, but as if one were merely holding up one's end in an intelligent conversation. The assumption behind this seemed to be that your readers had of course read the same books you had; and that, if a new book was under discussion, they would soon read this book, too. Criticism in America has generally had more to do with teaching one's readers: introducing them to new subjects, straightening them out on old ones. An element of unspoken condescension often entered—and continues to enter—into the transaction. Criticism written by Americans has tended to be more thorough, that written by Englishmen—or at least by some Englishmen—more charming. V. S. Pritchett may be the last Englishman to have worked under the splendid assumption that his readers knew quite as much as he, were interested in pretty much the same things, and operated at the same level of sophistication.

Victor (after Queen Victoria) Sawdon (his grandmother's maiden name) Pritchett is an oddity—just how odd is explained in his autobiographical volumes—in not being in any way to the manner of literary culture born. To begin with a stark short-story writer's fact that he supplies, he grew up in a home without a dictionary. His was a family, he wrote in *Midnight Oil*, "where manners were unknown, where everyone shouted, and no one had any notion of taste, either good or bad." His father, a failed small business man, had greater powers of fantasy than of imagination, and his mother's idea of jolly sport was changing the living-room furniture around. By the time he was twelve, the family had moved something like a dozen times, each move necessitated by his Micawberish father's having fallen from yet another financial tightrope. Living on the economic edge, the family worked without a net. The cab was all too often at the door.

Along with these discouragements, Pritchett's father became an earnest Christian Scientist. Pritchett describes this religion, to which as a boy he was himself an adherent, as "notoriously a menopause religion," and one that, doubtless owing to its abstractness, "sounded better in German." Later in life he would describe it as "an enfeebled form of Emersonian metaphysics." In a story titled "The Saint," Pritchett remarks that "indeed our religion taught us never to believe what we saw"—not exactly the best training for a writer in the making. A religion of optimism, at least Christian Science didn't weigh a young man down with heavy notions of original sin. When he was young, Christian Science also provided Pritchett a social life through its Sunday school. In Paris, beginning to write, he early published in a Christian Science journal. He claimed that what finally allowed him to slip away from the religion was family egotism: "From our mother we had inherited an eye and ear for comedy; from our grandfather and father, a gift for irony and sarcasm."

1 *V. S. Pritchett: Complete Collected Stories*; Random House, 1,220 pages, $35.

2 *V. S. Pritchett: Complete Collected Essays*; Random House, 1,139 pages, $35.

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Pritchett should by all rights have ended his days at a clerkish job of some sort—in a bank, perhaps, or a minor government department—for, as he says in the first volume of his autobiography, his grammar school was "intended to supply clerks for the boys who were going to public schools." He was a sometimes passionate but highly uneven student. He failed the one examination that might have provided him a chance to go to university. Had he not done so, he feels, he probably would have gone on to become a teacher or an academic. "I had had a narrow escape," he laconically notes. His grandfather, whom he describes as "looking like a sergeant major who didn't drink," upon one day inquiring after young Victor's age and being told he was fifteen, flatly stated to his father, "Put him to work." The sentence came down like the thump of a gavel. "My boyhood," Pritchett sadly remarks, "was over." He was sent out, wearing a bowler hat, to work in the leather trades.

How did Pritchett slog on through to achieve such considerable renown for literary achievement: from benighted to knighted in one generation, for he is now Sir Victor? As with many another writer, his natural disadvantages were a help. He hated dull work, he suffered from ennui, he had neither the taste nor the talent for making money. On the credit side of the ledger, he had an instinctive admiration for skill in any form; an aptitude for language, French and German being two subjects he had done well at in school and the sound of words being an obsession of his from childhood; and he felt a yearning toward art and culture and, to go along with it, a usefully nagging sense of his own inferiority. "Would I 'catch up?'" he asked himself, daunted as a boy by the books in a friend's father's library. (Decades later he would write: "I am appalled by the amount I have read.") Finally, his own homelife had distanced him from the world, and the seven years he would later spend in France, Spain, and Ireland made him feel a stranger at home and a foreigner even in his own country. What we have here, seen in retrospect, is the perfect combination of elements for a writer: a young man of intelligence, energy, and curiosity, mildly disaffected, and unfit to do anything else but write.

After a spell working in the leather trade in Paris, during which he attempted to paint, Pritchett began writing in earnest. His first publication was a joke he sold to *The New York Herald*, about which, in *Midnight Oil*, he notes: "It taught me one thing. If one had nothing to say one could at any rate write what other people said." (Writing what other people said—sounds rather like the perfect job description of the literary critic.) One minor publication led to another; soon he set to work on a travel book. He made a mistaken first marriage. (All Pritchett's subsequent books are dedicated to his second wife, Dorothy.) He worked as a correspondent in Ireland and then in Spain, a country with which he fell in love. (His dearest friend was Gerald Brenan, author of *The Spanish Labyrinth*.) As a writer, he preferred to use the initials V. S. because he liked the impersonality of it, and, besides, "to have added the 't' of Victor to a name that already had three [t's], and was already made fidgety by a crush of consonants and two short vowels, seemed ridiculous."

Pritchett's first book, *Marching Spain*, a travel book, was filled, as he allowed more than forty years after having written it, with "exhibitionist prose" and errors of fact, but also with touches of originality and vigor. Not least among V. S. Pritchett's gifts is his ability to apprehend his own literary qualities. It is part of his talent for getting outside himself; a rare skill, it makes him in some ways his own best critic. In scattered comments in *Midnight Oil*, he limns his strengths and weaknesses, proclivities and antipathies with a nice detachment fitting to a writer who claims that "to strain after the essence of things has become a mania with me."

"I am no thinker or philosopher," Pritchett avers, truly enough. He knows that such truths as are available to him come through the impressions experience makes on him. He claims to have had a "vulgar instinct for survival." He also believes that "any orig-

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inality in my writing is due to having something of a foreign mind," even though he is usually described as a traditionally English writer. "I have talent," he writes, "but no genius." That may well be true, but it has always seemed to me that the English language is deficient in not possessing a word that lies between the two; it would be a word that described how far talent, honed under the pressure of unrelenting hard work, can take one. This missing word would, I think, apply nicely to V. S. Pritchett.

Pritchett began writing for *The New Statesman* in 1928, when Clifford Sharp was editor and the charmingly indolent Desmond MacCarthy, who was rarely to be found on the premises, was literary editor. The weekly was dedicated to Fabian Socialism, but always allowed itself lots of latitude in the back of the book, as the pages given over to books and culture were called. Although his was a generation whose politics were formed by the Spanish Civil War, Pritchett reports that his own experience with so all-embracing a religion as Christian Science made it impossible for him to swallow Marxism, whose totalitarian consequences were repugnant to him. Besides, as he writes, "I was constitutionally a non-believer. Rarely have the active politicals had a deep regard for imaginative literature." And the political, it is true, has never been anywhere near the center of Pritchett's own writing, either as a critic or a storyteller.

Pritchett kept up his connection with *The New Statesman* through the years, all the while writing for other papers, but it was during World War II that the nature of his book reviewing there changed. Until then he wrote about new books, but, with the paper shortages owing to the war greatly curtailing the production of new books, and many other contributors to the paper off fighting the war, he was now called upon to write the leading literary article for each week's issue. It was usually an article dealing with a re-reading of one of the classics. At a length of not more than two thousand words, he kept a flow of these articles coming: "one week the subject might be Walter Scott, the next Dostoyevsky, after that Benjamin Constant, George Fox, Zola, *Gil Blas*, and so on." This turned him from a reviewer with highbrow tastes into something much closer to a critic.

As Pritchett notes in *Midnight Oil*, he not only had no university training in any branch of literature, but "I had no critical doctrine —a shock later to the platoons of New Critics and later regiments—for critical doctrine is of little interest to the novelist, though it may mean something to the poet." He did avail himself of a few core notions: one was that the historical situation of the writer was always of interest; another that, as a practicing novelist and short-story writer himself, he often had keen and useful insights into the means and methods with which novelists worked; and yet another was that "literature grows out of literature as much as out of a writer's times," by which he meant nothing so arcane as Professor Harold Bloom's "the anxiety of influence," but, as he puts it in an essay on Goncharov, "literature had a double source: one in life, the other in literature itself."

Although early in his career Pritchett produced a few novels, and he wrote more than one complete book on Spain, his reputation today rests on his work as a literary critic and as a short-story writer. Lucky is the writer who has found his forms, and these have been Pritchett's. "I have had to conclude," he writes in *Midnight Oil*, "that I am a writer who takes short breaths, and in consequence the story and the essay have been the best forms for me." I have called Pritchett a literary critic, but the term "literary essayist" perhaps makes a better fit. Unlike the great literary critics, Pritchett does not write out of a moral or cultural program. Approaching the work of a writer, often a writer of well-established reputation, Pritchett seems instead keenest to understand why this writer exerts the powerful interest he does and whence his power derives. The placement of a writer in his tradition and a judgment upon his work finally do emerge in a Pritchett essay, but they tend to do so subtly, by the way, almost as matters of subsidiary interest.

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About his literary essays Pritchett has written: "I see myself as a practicing writer who gives himself to a book as he gives himself to any human experience," which is reminiscent of Anatole France's remark that "the good critic is he who relates the adventures of his soul amongst masterpieces." Pritchett has not written about poets. (In *A Cab at the Door*, he claims that the forms of Protestantism in which he was brought up fertilized neither sensibility nor the poetic imagination, but in prose he "found the common experience and the solid worlds where judgments were made and in which one could firmly tread.") He occasionally writes about but is less than satisfactory on books of limited subject (Malraux on Picasso), or books about a single event or incident in literary history (the murder of Lorca), or a historical work (Ladurie's *Montaillou*). He has written preponderantly about novelists, where he is at his best, and he is especially good when presented with an opportunity to biograph, or draw a portrait of the novelist through his work.

V. S. Pritchett is a critic without anger. He shows some mild animus against academic criticism, with its penchant for barbed-wire jargon, and in one of his essays notes that "literary criticism does not add to its status by opening an intellectual hardware store." He is also quite without snobbery, and can be amusing on other people's snobbery. Of Evelyn Waugh's autobiography, *A Little Learning*, he writes: "Prep school, public school, university: these now tedious influences standardise English autobiography, giving the educated Englishman the sad if fascinating appearance of a stuffed bird of sly and beady eye in some odd seaside museum." Only rarely is he autobiographical in his criticism, and when he is, he is rather touchingly so: "The last time I wept over a novel was in reading *Tess* when I was 18. Fifty years later Fortunata [a character in Peréz Galdós's novel *Fortunata and Jacenta*] has made me weep again."

That Pritchett would weep over the fate of a character in a novel is revealing of his method as a critic. For Pritchett takes characters in novels very seriously. He will write, devastatingly, of the characters in Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*, that Butler "chose them for their mediocrity and then cursed them for it." Of *Middlemarch*, Pritchett writes that "the most moving thing in the book—and I always think this is the real test of a novelist—is given to the least likeable people." Characters do seem to have a life of their own for Pritchett, and part of the mystery of fiction is that novelists can on occasion create characters much more interesting than themselves. As a case in point, he adduces Oblomov so much more fascinating than the rather dull state official who was his creator, Ivan Goncharov. "From what leak in a mind so small and sealed," writes Pritchett, "did the unconscious drip out and produce the character of Oblomov, the sainted figure of non-productive sloth and inertia; one of those creatures who become larger and larger as we read?"

Pritchett's interest in both writers and the characters they create spares him, in most cases, the sleep-inducing burden of most critics of fiction, which is tedious plot summary. Writing about established masterpieces, Pritchett seldom has to take his readers by the hand and summarize the plot for them. At the same time, he understands that criticism, if it is to have a reasonably long life—and it is striking how readable so much of Pritchett's own criticism remains—must tell a story. The story that his criticism tells is about writers—their struggles, their creations, their uniqueness—so that, as Derwent May, writing in the *TLS*, has said, in a Pritchett essay we have not just the story of the novel but "the story of the writing and the reading of it as well." What Pritchett does, then, is tell us a story about the story.

Appreciation is at the heart of V. S. Pritchett's criticism. Appreciation provides a severe limitation on a critic, making him only as good as the work he is appreciative of. Perhaps this is why Pritchett seems best on nineteenth-century fiction, especially Russian and French fiction. He seems to me weakest on American writers: Mary McCarthy, Saul Bellow, John Updike, S. J. Perel-

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man, all of whom, with his customary impulse toward appreciation, I believe he overrates. Part of his problem with these writers is that they haven't created strong characters of the kind that are best for Pritchett's particular kind of criticism or that are memorable for more than their muddle; or, to put it more precisely, their muddle, unlike that of the characters of Italo Svevo, a writer whom Pritchett adores, is without redeeming charms. It may well be that the quality of a nation's fiction during any particular period is best measured by the number of memorable characters that fiction collectively yields. American fiction of the past thirty or so years does not score high by this test.

Impressive though I remember many of V. S. Pritchett's essays being when I first encountered them in *The New Statesman*, these essays seem even more impressive when read in bulk. One of the reasons for this is that one discovers that Pritchett has the ability to write freshly on a subject one might have thought had already been quite exhausted through having been critically over-mined in the work of academics—strip-mined might be the better term. George Bernard Shaw qualifies as such a subject. In a few neatly formulated sentences, Pritchett can reinvigorate interest in him. Shaw's "own addictions," he writes, "were the Irish addiction to words and the Puritan's to work." A few paragraphs on, he adds: "The Irish are almost always shy, almost always trying to conceal, and they have notoriously been apt to produce a stage personality to do so." True, it seems to me, not only of Shaw but of Wilde, Yeats, Joyce, Beckett, and every other strong Irish writer.

Reading Pritchett in bulk, one is also reminded of his appetite for generalization and, what often comes to the same thing, aphorism. The generalization and the aphoristic formulation are the natural tools of the critic seeking essences. From the *Complete Collected Essays*, one could almost scrape out a slender volume of *Pritchett's Unfamiliar But Damn Good Quotations*. Allow me to offer a handful: "Travel is one of the great rivals of women." "Literature is made of the misfortunes of others." "There is more magic in sin if it is not committed." "The principle of procrastinated rape is said to be the ruling one in all the great best-sellers." "The peculiar power of American nostalgia is that it is not only harking back to something lost in the past, but suggests also the tragedy of a lost future." "The ecstasies of sexual sensation are no more to be described than the ecstasies of music they resemble." "Remove the vices of a novelist and his virtues vanish too."

In Pritchett's searching for writers' essences, his essays strike many such generalizations and cut many fine distinctions, while his own wide reading has given him the power to make endless comparisons between writers and between centuries and between national literatures. This is, after all, what a literary critic does, even though fewer and fewer practitioners are up to the job. But toward what end does he put on this display of a subtle and well-stocked mind in action? It is a pleasing enough game—and, for those of us who have a taste for it, splendid to watch—but when is the trophy awarded?

The answer, which will not come to everyone as good news, is never. Not only is there nothing definitive, nothing of the last word about any of Pritchett's criticism, but it is unlikely that he ever expected there would be. Reviewing a collection of Graham Greene's essays, Pritchett remarked that, in this particular book, Greene was "before anything a novelist-critic—that is to say he writes to discover something for *his* purposes which might not be ours. His reviews are an artist's raids." There is something of this quality in Pritchett's literary essays, too, except that he is interested in what we all ought to be interested in: the mysteries of literary creation and what writers can tell us about human nature.

Pritchett joins the overwhelming majority in not being able to say with precision what human nature is, but he does greatly admire those writers who accept, as he says the novelist Galdós does, "human nature without resentment." One of the reasons Pritchett is so taken with Italo Svevo is that Svevo had

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the courage and the comic gift not only to investigate the contradictoriness of human nature but come up laughing at what he found. Although he appreciates much, Pritchett admires above all those writers, Jane Austen and Henry Fielding among them, "who face life squarely." Of them he writes:

> They are grown up. They do not cry for the moon. I do not mean that to be grown up is the first requirement of genius. To be grown up may be fatal to it. But short of the great illuminating madness, there is a power to sustain, assure, and enlarge us in those novelists who are not driven back by life, who are not shattered by the discovery that it is a thing bounded by unsought limits, by interests as well as by hopes, and that it ripens under restrictions. Such writers accept. They think that acceptance is the duty of a man.

Pritchett has written vast quantities of both criticism and fiction, but his personality comes through much more clearly in his criticism. He is, as usual, quite aware of this fact, even though he reports that writing stories has given him greater pleasure than writing criticism. "In my criticism, perhaps even more than in my stories, I am self-portrayed. When I reread those essays written in such number over the last thirty years, I am surprised to see how much they are pitted with personal experience, and how much reaction to life itself, either nettled or expansive, has been packed into an epigram or an aside." One of the problems with other critics who have written fiction—Edmund Wilson and Lionel Trilling come to mind—is that they sound quite the same in their fiction as they do in their criticism, so that fiction becomes, like war and diplomacy for Clausewitz, chiefly criticism by other means.

Nothing of the kind is true of Pritchett. Only rarely is the storyteller in him likely to be mistaken for the critic, so differently do the two sound. While a V. S. Pritchett literary essay has its author's fingerprints all over it, I am not so sure that I could recognize a V. S. Pritchett short story without its author's name atop it. "The creative writer must know his own mind," Desmond MacCarthy once remarked, "the critic must also know the minds of other people." As a storyteller there is something ventriloquistic about Pritchett. *Voice*, the current cant word in university creative writing programs to describe the distinctive way a writer sounds, is not strong in Pritchett's fiction. He does many voices: he does the lower-middle and working classes in a hundred different voices. His own sometimes gets lost in the cacophony.

Is this a bad thing? Does it matter if there is nothing distinctively Pritchettian about a V. S. Pritchett short story? Isn't the main thing that a fair number simply are good stories—and the hell with their fitting a pattern or dovetailing into something sufficiently uniform to be called an *oeuvre*? Writers of great contemporary reputation—Eudora Welty, William Trevor, Robertson Davies—have weighed in with testimonials about the pleasure Pritchett's stories give and compare them with those of Joyce and Chekhov. One understands their having done so; one wants to admire Pritchett's stories.

Something about the quietly sedulous way Pritchett has written his fiction is immensely attractive. There is an admirably selfless quality to his storytelling. For one thing, he has, in his fiction, taken up a people forgotten by literature: the English lower-middle class of shopkeepers, salesmen, dentists, minor manufacturers, publicans, clerks, antique dealers, and wives whose beauty and dreams have faded too quickly. What Pritchett once wrote about Gissing, may, in good part, also be said of him: "[His] discovery that in all character there sits a mind, and that the mind of the dullest is not dull because, at its very lowest, it will at least reflect the social dilemma into which it was born, is arresting." The point is connected with Pritchett's general view, set out in his criticism, that fiction ought not to disparage its characters or be written as if by foreigners living in their own country, which he believes a good deal of English and American fiction appears to have been.

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Much of the program for Pritchett's own fiction seems to have been announced in his criticism. Apropos of Isaac Babel, Pritchett writes that "short story writers are poets," and that what the short story sets out to achieve is "an insight." Apropos of Borges, he notes that, "in the writer of short stories as in the poet, a distinctive voice, unlike all others, must arrest us," and he adds that the test of the artist is whether he can make his ideas walk, which is to say, come alive. Apropos of Kipling, he adds that the short story is "a form which depends on intensifying the subject, stamping a climate on it, getting at the essence of it."

Many of Pritchett's own stories exemplify these aesthetic axioms. Poetic though he may think the short-story form ultimately is or ought to be, his own vast output of stories includes almost every variety known to the form, and in my opinion his longer stories tend to be better than those in which he goes after more strictly poetic effects. "A short story," he writes in an essay on Flannery O'Connor, "ought to be faultless without being mechanical. The wrong word, a misplaced paragraph, an inadequate phrase or a convenient explanation, start fatal leaks in this kind of writing which is formally very close to poetry."

If Pritchett has a serious fault as a storyteller it is in his own impulse toward the poetic, which shows up in occasional small but disturbing touches. In one story a man sticks his hands in "his optimistic pockets"; in another a woman is wearing a "capable skirt"; another woman has "the disorder of a story"; a man is "as conceited as a gravestone"; another man has "an unreasonable chin and emotional knees"; yet another man stands "like a touchy exclamation mark"; and several clerks have "dejected buttocks," for which perhaps trousers with "optimistic pockets" ought to be recommended.

The stories are also sometimes studded with occasional aphoristic bits reminiscent of V. S. Pritchett's criticism. The narrator of "The Sailor" remarks: "Actually, I am in favour of snobbery, it is a sign of character. It's a bad thing to have, but it's a bad thing not to have had. You can't help having the diseases of your time." In the same story, the same character announces that "the secret of happiness is to find a congenial monotony." There are also numerous little touches straining after poetry and achieving it, such as a clergyman, in one story, comporting himself "like the actor walking in the sun of his own vanity"; or the man who, moving different parts of his body separately, "danced, as it were, in committee." Pritchett can be relied upon to have done his homework. If he writes about antique dealers, or window-washers, or bakers, he is always careful to get the niceties of these lines of work right. He often penetrates well beneath the surface of details to understand the drama playing there, a drama that is inseparable from a knowledge of such details. In "The Camberwell Beauty," a story about the obsession of antique dealing, Pritchett writes:

> Mrs. Price—August's woman—was living with a man exactly like the others in the trade: he hated customers and hated parting with anything. By middle age these women have dead blank faces, they look with resentment and indifference at what is choking their shops; their eyes go smaller and smaller as the chances of getting rid of it become rarer and rarer and they are defeated. Kept out of the deals their husbands have among themselves, they see even their natural love of intrigue frustrated. This was the case of Mrs. Price, who must have been handsome in a big-boned way when she was young, but who had swollen into a drudge.

If a poet can hit the gong six or seven times, leaving behind that number of great poems, his claim to immortality, it has been said, is assured. The same ought perhaps to be true of storytellers, except that, as has been noted countless times, not least by V. S. Pritchett in his criticism, "how little a novelist's [or short-story writer's] choice of story and character widens or changes between his first book and his last." This seems to be true, too, of Pritchett's own stories, eighty-two of which are included in his *Complete Collected*

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Stories, with the added oddity that one of his best stories, "Sense of Humour," is also among his earliest. Of these four-score and two stories, six or seven really are splendid. Among them I would include, along with "Sense of Humour," "It May Never Happen," "The Saint," "The Camberwell Beauty," "The Sailor," "The Skeleton," and "The Necklace." For really splendid stories, that's a lot.

In his fiction, Pritchett is thought to be a comic writer. "Class is a funny thing," says a character, double-entendrically, in the story "Noisy Flushes the Birds," and though Pritchett wrings much humor out of the sometimes extreme social limitations that are locked in by social class in England, his stories are more often striking in their darkness. Loneliness is the condition of so many of Pritchett's characters, who must make do with a life that has disappointed expectations, where expectations even existed in the first place. "There is a loneliness in fat," he remarks of the two fat men in one of his stories. An elderly homosexual, after tea and toast in the morning, "looked eagerly to see what was annoying in the papers—some new annoyance to add to a lifetime's accumulation of annoyances." "The Two Brothers," another tale of loneliness, ends on the following sentences: "He took out a razor and became absorbed in the difficulty of cutting his throat. He was not quite dead when the Guards broke in and found him." Life, in Pritchett's stories, twists and breaks people apart.

The final story in the *Complete Collected Stories*, "The Image Trade," which feels very autobiographical, is about an elderly writer named Pearson who is being photographed by a fashionable photographer named Zut. As the photographer is setting things up, the writer thinks:

> Dozens of photographs of me have been taken. I could show you my early slim-subaltern-on-the-Somme-waiting-to-go-over-the-top period. There was my Popular Front look in the Thirties and Forties, the jersey-wearing, all-the-world's-a-coal-mine period, with close-ups of the pores and scars of the skin and the gleam of sweat. There was the editorial look, when the tailor had to let out the waist of my trousers, followed by the successful smirk. In the Sixties the plunging neckline, no tie. Then back to collar and tie in my failed-bronze-Olympic period. Today I fascinate archaeologists—you know, the broken pillar of a lost civilisation. Come on, Zut. What do you want?

Later, when Pearson is presented with the finished photograph, he claims to see in its high-ceilinged, book-filled room not a room at all but "a dank cistern or aquarium of stale water. No sparkling anemone there but the bald head of a melancholy frog, its feet clinging to a log, floating in literature." Quite an arresting, not to say devastating, little image, that, suggesting that a career soaked in literature can turn a man at the end of a long life into a saddened frog. Must be something to it, viewed from within, or else Pritchett would not have thought of it.

And yet how different Pritchett's career looks from outside that room! Brick by brick, essay by essay, story by story, he has over the years built a modest yet quite sturdy literary edifice. Writing for a small and probably diminishing audience, he has never lowered his standard or sullied his integrity. In an essay on the novelist Ada Leverson, Pritchett claimed that her career proved that one could be both a minor novelist and yet a considerable artist. To bring this off, he felt, one required a freshness of view without borrowing the courage of anyone else's convictions; skill in construction and distinction in style; and a delight in one's own limits, so that even when one was dealing only with what seemed the surface of life one's seriousness and life-enhancing quality shone through. Pritchett might, of course, have been writing about himself—a doubtless minor writer, but a true artist who has written an uncommonly high number of essays and stories built to last.

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Back to the Sixties with Spindoctor Graff

by James W. Tuttleton

I like to think I have a certain advantage as a teacher of literature because when I was growing up I disliked and feared books.
—Gerald Graff

The profession of literary studies in the university has become so risible a subject in newspaper and magazine articles that tremors are beginning to be felt in the academy. What, professors want to know, is going wrong? It does no good to tell them that they have corrupted the rich curriculum of literature in English into a mind-numbing, monotonous replication of the same old left-wing ideological harangue—the race-class-gender victimization thing. And it is pointless to tell them that their preoccupation with the jargon of incomprehensible theory is driving students away from literature classes. Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (1987), Dinesh D'Souza in *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (1991), and Roger Kimball in *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (1990) took the problem seriously, suggested various remedies, and—in the critical quarterlies and at literary conventions—were savaged for their pains.

However, these books had the effect of clarifying a wide range of disturbing phenomena about higher education. And out of their work has emerged a general consensus, which goes something like this: "*Nothing can or will change in the academy in the near future. Those within the academy who might have acted to reintroduce reason into the management of the curriculum—presidents, chancellors, and deans—have been, on the whole, impercipient, pusillanimous, and mum: unwilling, for whatever reason, to risk their place or popularity with the radicals among the professoriate. Many faculty members in law and sociology appear to have been infected with the virus. Professors of the hard sciences, medicine, and business haven't been, but they seem to want little to do with the whole issue, as they see humanists as wacko spokespeople for* NOW, *Queer Nation, the transcendent superiority of Third World ways, or the wisdom of 'Dr. Ruth.' Since the wackos get nasty at the first sign of any disagreement, cultivate your own garden but don't, under the present circumstances, get drawn into the Lit-Crit Follies.*"

The attitude I am describing is not resignation, even though the Clinton administration promises to radicalize the national endowments and other institutions that have heretofore supported genuine literary studies. No, it is now widely believed that—since the university is in the hands of the Sixties radicals, who have attained senior professorships and risen to institutional power—a generation or more will have to pass before the aims and purposes of a genuine liberal education can be reasserted and achieved. As lit-profs are a national laughingstock, the only proper response is to ignore the freaks or, if necessary, simply give a

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straight-faced description of what they are saying and doing. No exaggeration for satiric effect is necessary.

If lit-crit professors, like Rodney Dangerfield, don't get no respect, a few of them are sentient enough to want to know why. Enter Gerald Graff, George M. Pullman Professor of English and Education at the University of Chicago. He has appointed himself the oleaginous and ingratiating intermediary between the professorial left wing and those (whether within or without the university) who think in traditional terms about the aims of education. The subtitle of his new book—*Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education*—conveys his thesis in a nutshell.[1] If we have differences about what constitutes the canon, a work of literature, or the meaning of a text, let's make those differences the basis for a curriculum. Let's stage an argument about our differences in the presence of the students.

I shall return to this thesis and to its implications for higher education in a moment. First, it seems useful to reflect on Graff's rhetoric and implied audience. It would appear that at least some of his remarks are addressed to Outsiders (parents, politicians, the curious reading public) who want to know what the culture wars inside the university are all about. For them, he has a simple unctuous message: Things in the university are not as bad as you have seen in the newspapers and magazines. The "well-publicized horror stories about intolerant political correctness on campus" are really exaggerations. There aren't really any left-wing totalitarians in the university. And if there seem to be, well, heck, it's because complex intellectual matters on campus get oversimplified in the popular press. "A doctrinaire assault on 'dead white males' can be easily summarized in a column inch or two, whereas it would take many pages to describe intellectual movements that are complex, diverse, and rife with internal conflicts." What we find in the press are therefore "glib falsifications." Graff's message to uninitiated Outsiders: "the critics have not been telling the truth."

It is part of the slick quality of this book that Professor Graff undertakes to persuade Outsiders that, really, it's all a misunderstanding and is, in fact, the academics' fault:

> Academics have given journalists and others little help in understanding the more difficult forms of academic work. As this work has become increasingly complex and as it increasingly challenges conventionally accepted forms of thinking, the university acquires an obligation to do a more effective job of popularization.

It's really, don't you see, simply a matter of poor public relations, which would be managed better if only academics wrote more helpful books like *Beyond the Culture Wars*. To an Insider, one within the university, Graff's work will be seen as pathetic pleading, and the tone is that of a prolonged whine. *These cultural arguments are too complex for you Outsiders . . . we're not that bad . . . why can't you respect us?* Graff would have the Outsiders "stop listening to those who tell us that controversy is a symptom of barbarism and that education was better in the past. . . ."

Graff says that those who complain of left-wing totalitarians in the university aren't even academics, so what can they really know about the university situation? George Will, a persistent critic of higher education today, is really just a newspaperman who has never sat in a faculty meeting and never debated in committee what should go into a syllabus. Lynne Cheney and William Bennett are or were, well, fronts for the government. Roger Kimball is merely a journal editor. And Dinesh D'Souza *only graduated* a couple of years ago—what can he, or any of them for that matter, know of grave faculty deliberations? In fact, Graff would have the Outsider believe that *Tenured Radicals* and *Illiberal Education* reflect a "polarity" between "intel-

1 *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education*, by Gerald Graff; Norton, 214 pages, $19.95.

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lectuals and nonintellectuals, or between those who have been socialized into the intellectual community and those who have not and are not sure they want to be." In descending to this *ad hominem* argument, Graff wants Outsiders to believe that the criticism against university radicalism leveled in these books is the result of anti-intellectualism, invidiousness, snobbishness, and social condescension.

But of course Outsiders are not fools. They know that this stuff about the culture wars comes directly from faculty members who are protesting coercion by the race-class-gender totalitarians who control the institution. Graff does not confront at length Insiders like Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind*, E. D. Hirsch in *Cultural Literacy*, or Robert Alter in *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age*. On the whole, his tactic is to call conservative academics ignorant or to nitpick with them over minor matters. A literalist when he wants to be, Graff gives pages to *proving* that Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* has not bumped Shakespeare from the reading lists. But of course the real issue, of which *Purple* is the transient symbol, is busting the canon with second-rate works for the sake of making a political argument on behalf of some aggrieved minority. In any case, Graff complains to Outsiders, if *Purple* is in the curriculum, it's usually there as an add-on. But of course, as Insiders know, in any tight fifteen-week term, add-on reading can be introduced only if something canonical is dropped.

The most offensive of Graff's tactics is to say that traditional professors, like his sometime colleague at Northwestern, Joseph Epstein, don't know what they're talking about.

> It would be tedious to try to document all the attacks on politically oriented literary theories and approaches that could not conceivably be based on any firsthand knowledge of their subject. Attacks on deconstruction, for example, have come routinely from writers who have never read the work of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man and haven't a clue as to what deconstruction is about. (The determined anti-PC warrior is not deterred by the knowledge that he has no clue to what something is about; after acknowledging that he finds Derrida incomprehensible, Joseph Epstein proceeds to ridicule deconstruction for saying, supposedly, "that literature [is] itself inherently false, corrupt, in need of destruction.")

In defense of Epstein, it should be said that deconstructionism *is* at times incomprehensible—for at least three reasons. First, Derrida's whole method stresses the indeterminacy of meaning in language, and those gaps, ruptures, and fissures in discourse that complicate univocal meaning. I recently asked Derrida about a course he was teaching in my department. Its subject, he would only say, was "Secrets." Applied, his method deals with revealing the secrets of the text. That which is hidden and concealed, that which rhetorical analysis can unmask, is his subject. But, second, Derrida as a rhetorician is in the business of *creating* linguistic complications. It is my impression that he would not be caught dead making an unequivocal statement. Consequently, his prose style puts darkening pressures on the capacity of language to communicate; it "em[bed]s [see]crets" in his prose for the acolyte to find. Yet the result is that sometimes not even his acolytes understand him. And we must add a third point. No longer is Derrida in control of the meaning of deconstructionism in the American university. So many people are saying so many contradictory things in the name of deconstructionism that Derrida has become alarmed at the lit-crit crowd. In a recent remark in Gary A. Olson's *(Inter)views: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives On Rhetoric and Literacy*, Derrida comes close to disavowing his literary followers for corrupting his method. Very possibly there is somebody out there, writing under the banner of deconstruction, who really thinks that "literature is itself inherently false, corrupt, in need of destruction." Epstein can hardly be blamed if even some of Derrida's followers find him incomprehensible or misinterpret

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him. The fact is that English departments are now full of people who hate literature and regard it as a privileged instrument of class oppression, racial discrimination, and sexual tyranny.

Yet, in fact, Derrida and de Man have been read *quite closely* and intelligently by a number of Insider critics who are indeed philosophically and intellectually equipped to understand deconstructionism, despite the sometimes "barbarous, ideologically loaded jargon" that Graff defends as "just another critical vocabulary" with its own valuable "shorthand." In a plea for sympathy from the Outsider, Graff remarks that "even the most clearly written criticism will be gibberish to people who have not been socialized into the literary or intellectual community." But, as one Insider who has read a great deal of this material—in connection with my graduate course in the history of literary criticism—I can say that much of what is published in books and quarterlies *is* just gibberish. And the claim that Outsiders and traditionalist Insiders like Professor Epstein cannot understand it because of its gnostic difficulty is intellectual snobbishness at its worst.[2]

I shall pass over the very skimpy personal parts of this book—sections that retail Graff's growing up as a Jewish boy in a tough mixed neighborhood in Chicago, where he got beat up; his early aversion to books; his preference for popular culture over high culture; and his gradual discovery that books have something to say. None of this is of any importance except as a way to build up Outsider sympathy for Graff as just a regular guy who wants to be a peacemaker between contending departmental factions and has figured out a way to do it.

How will he do it? How does *Beyond the Culture Wars* propose to create an "intellectual community" where there is now departmental wrangling? Graff's answer sounds simple:

> the best solution to today's conflicts over culture is to teach the conflicts themselves, making them part of our object of study and using them as a new kind of organizing principle to give the curriculum the clarity and focus that almost all sides now agree it lacks.

Of course some changes in thought and practice would have to be made. In the first place, we would have to dump the conservative idea that we have a common culture and accept, in its place, the idea that there is only a common discourse (the purpose of which, Graff makes it appear, is wholly polemical): "Instead of pretending we can eliminate political conflict from teaching, we should start making use of it." (A great many of us Insiders will part company with Graff here, but let us hear him out.) Second, we would have to dispose of our fetish of the Great Teacher, the master of the solo presentation; for the single course prevents "community" with other courses and their professors. Professors who disagree with each other—traditionalists and Marxists, feminists and deconstructionists, gays, and new or old historicists—are, in Graff's scheme, to be thrown together and told to work out their arguments in the form of a syllabus. (As I refect on my college experience, it was the Great Teacher who most mattered to me. But let us go on.)

Graff proposes several "curricular innovations" to replace the individual teacher. He is keen to have two or more instructors exchange classes. Several courses, he thinks, could be clustered around a theme—like feminism, naturally. A faculty Mediator could be installed on the floor to translate and interpret to the groundlings what the onstage antagonists (who are socialized in the relevant critical jargon) are really saying. Even a "transcourse symposium"—a sort of mini-MLA convention—could be created around a topic like, say, multiculturalism. All the teachers would be involved! This procedure he calls the "conflict model"; and Graff

2 It should be noted that Professor Epstein is the editor of *The American Scholar*, a superior journal of intellectual reflection and the publication of Phi Beta Kappa, the principal university society for honoring distinguished intellectual work.

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believes that it will get faculties to marshall their evidence, sharpen their arguments, and *demonstrate to students* the urgency of these cultural issues. No longer would there be "some lone professor mumbling over his lecture notes about Emily Dickinson's dates of birth and death." No longer would the university be able to "quarantine" intellectual life into the class hour, constrict it into the single course. Alienated students, energized by the spectacle of their disputatious professors, will come streaming back to literature classes. They would get into the argument themselves. *The humanities would be saved.*

To me, Graff's bright idea sounds like a Sixties "Teach-In," except that here the radical interruptive disputants have the classroom floor and can *legitimately* shout down the traditionalist. The "university without walls" is now within the door. In this new *Freiuniversität*, everybody will "rap" together until "new sociological truths" emerge. (They are already evident in the quarterlies: "The System stinks." "Black is Beautiful." "Multicultural is Ba-aa-dd" (that is, Go-oo-od). "Sisterhood is Powerful." "Gay is Grand." "DWEMS are Dorky." Finally, "Hey-hey, ho-ho, Western Culture's Gotta Go.") The only thing lacking in Graff's "new classroom agenda" is retiring afterwards to the faculty lounge to pass around a joint and sing "We Shall Overcome."

While we contemplate the return of Joan Baez, there are of course some serious kinks in Graff's reprise of the Sixties. Some Insiders, like me, will say that one's primary classroom task is that of teaching the student a subject, not staging a counterculture debate with colleagues: I for one don't want a radical mucking in—especially over a transient critical methodology. These "brilliant new critical methodologies" (as they are always being called) succeed each other at such a rapid rate that we condemn our students to faddism when we waste class time on them. Structuralism, which so exercised the avant-garde twenty years ago, is now defunct; reader-response discourse has already collapsed of its own subjectivity; deconstructionism has been *passé* for some time; "phallogocentrism" and the "clitoral imagination" are quaint reminders of long-forgotten epiphanies. Feminists tell us that Freud is finito; but even Lacan's days are numbered. Meanwhile, what remains? Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Dickinson, Ellison, Poe, Faulkner, and Eliot—the canon of permanently interesting texts.

The problem with Graff is that he believes that the aim of education is only to make one think, when, in fact, there is also a body of literature out there that ought to be read experientially before any discussion of extraneous abstract methodologies by figures like Foucault, Derrida, or Lacan is even contemplated. But even on the level of cognition, students have to have something to think about, and the canon is that which, as literature professors, we can give them. Any reading *about* literature competes with and displaces the direct reading of literature itself and so deprives students of their precious heritage. Of course, some of our colleagues will be arguing with us that there isn't any literature, only texts, all of equivalent interpretive and polemical value, blah, blah, blah.

But in these staged debates over a text, what if the novel doesn't have an explicit politics? Not to worry. Graff quotes with fulsome approval a remark of Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian novelist, that "even the attempt to say nothing about politics is a big political statement. You are saying, then, that everything is OK." This is a point of view that only an activist political ideologue of some stripe could hold; it naturally conduces to the view that any novel or poem without an explicit politics has "repressed" its hidden, reactionary assumptions (about race or class or gender) and must therefore be demystified and condemned.

For Graff it is "not just the object of study but *the kind of question being asked about it*" that is important. In fact, finding a way to force the right kind of question, the political question, is more important to Graff than the object of study in and of itself. And if the object of study—the great poem, or novel, or play—isn't explicitly political or if it doesn't

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naturally provoke the right kind of political question, Graff advises Insiders to substitute a lesser text. The logic here is quite explicit: "it does not follow that culturally acknowledged great works generate a more substantial, challenging, and interesting critical or pedagogical discourse than do less valued works"; if so, there is no reason to hang onto them: dump the classics in favor of texts that make for slam-bang classroom political contention.

John Searle has properly advised university professors to keep personal politics out of the classroom and not to use it as the scene of indoctrination. But for Graff, to raise political issues in the classroom is not necessarily a "corrupting intrusion." Perhaps not in theory, but in fact, in colleges, universities, learned societies, and journals of criticism and scholarship, the manifest scorn for the canon of great books and the agitation to dump the classics in favor of second-rate texts that support politically correct attitudes have already corrupted the literary enterprise. This has been achieved by the political takeover of key committees, by browbeating the traditional scholar into departmental silence, and by sneering at the conventional textual critic.

Having taken over the committees, got the political power, and browbeaten their conservative colleagues, however, what have Graff and his left-wing allies discovered? They have discovered that there is a large number of traditional professors of literature out there who don't and won't read every literary work in terms of some political litmus test. Each one has his own class, his own students, his own personal platform from which he launches his distinctive aesthetic and critical exploration. *Each of them has academic freedom!* The problem for the left-winger is, then: How to offset the academic freedom of the lone professor? How to get into his classroom? How to neutralize him, get at and indoctrinate his students? Graff's book is a *vade mecum* for radicals on the topic of "what is to be done with those teachers and students who do not wish to be radicalized." And here things really get scary.

Graff's various curriculum proposals—team teaching, courses clustered around an idea, obliging faculty to debate each other—are really devices to coerce a departmental political focus favorable to the left. The most horrifying aspect of the book is the description of two new radical programs—one at Syracuse University, the other at Carnegie Mellon. The new Syracuse major, called English and Textual Studies, effectively "replaces 'a traditional pluralism,' in which different viewpoints are separately presented, with a framework in which each position 'acknowledges its allied or contestatory relation to other positions.'" In the Carnegie Mellon Literature and Cultural Studies program, the goal is "to bring into debate a host of epistemologies, distinctive methodologies, issues, problems, and challenges" with the understanding that "some will not survive the battle or that we will find ourselves led into conversations we didn't expect."

What is not going to survive the contestation, I suspect, is the traditional professor, the man or woman who thinks that literature is an art rather than a branch of politics or sociology and who wishes to present it to students as a rich, complex experience not reducible to the objectives of the radical left. Graff reassures Outsiders:

> No teacher at Syracuse is *forced* to enter the departmental dialogue. However, according to Steven Mailloux, the department chair who led the installation of the new program (he has since left the university), because the program is organized as a dialogue, any teacher's refusal to enter can be interpreted by students as itself a meaningful choice (not necessarily a discreditable one). Under the Syracuse plan, Mailloux writes, "a faculty member simply continuing to teach his course in a traditional, isolated way does not undermine the curricular 'conversation' because the curriculum causes his action to be read as a move in the conversation. Since students will be helped to 'read' their courses side-by-side, when they take a traditionalist course they will be able to read it through the grid of the new major." It remains to be seen

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> how well the conception will translate into practice, but the principle seems to me sound.

Sound? It is a recipe for punishing the independent thinker. First, the departmental boss tells the lone professor that he is not *forced* to collaborate; then his non-cooperation is noted as intentional; then there is the insinuation that his non-cooperation is possibly discreditable; students are then instructed by the cooperators in how to view the traditionalist and his non-cooperative course. I have no doubt about the fate of the lone non-cooperator: first, the salary cut, then discriminatory course assignments, then the impossible schedule—and before and above all else, chairmanly and departmental contempt. Since the Department is now a Commune for promulgating left-wing sociological arguments, with a view to politically correct indoctrination, the lone professor can be expected to undergo group "Re-education" and "Rehabilitation."

Is this a paranoid scenario? I submit that coercion is built into the structure of these two programs and that unless both departments are wholly composed of leftists, coercion has already occurred or will soon do so. Further, I submit that the success of Graff's ideas portends the loss of academic freedom and the liberty of the lone professor to define his subject. Graff's deceit in this book is to pretend to present himself as a moderate who diplomatically negotiates cultural differences. But elsewhere he has described himself as "a leftist" who finds it "tempting to try to turn the curriculum into an instrument of social change." The purpose of the book is frankly left-wing damage control in the public-relations area, and Graff is the spindoctor. Under the guise of teaching the conflicts so as to educate the student, his agenda is really to seize the classroom of the lone, dissenting professor so as finally to make it too an instrument of social transformation.

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Camus today

by Renee Winegarten

I am not a philosopher . . . and I only know how to speak of what I have lived. I have lived nihilism, contradiction, violence and the vertigo of destruction.
—Albert Camus, *Lettres sur la révolte*

Camus, after Kafka, a fellow sufferer from tuberculosis, was haunted by judgment, by those who judge, and by the question of their right to do so. "Before the bar of history, Caligula, the bar of history!" cries Camus's odious yet fascinating Roman emperor. Caligula's very last words in the play, uttered with a gasping laugh as he is being struck down, are—astonishingly—"I am still alive!" Like so much of Camus's writing, with its deceptive surface of classical clarity, these words resonate with mystery as well as savage irony.

Caligula is still conscious of life, still full of life, when he is stabbed to death by the conspirators he awaits in a form of "superior suicide"; he is defiant and triumphant at the very moment when he is overcome and breathes his last. Does it mean that the spirit of this aspiring monster, who tests and goes beyond every limit on human conduct, is alive in the world and even in ourselves? That is what Camus once implied. Is Caligula one aspect of the plague that Camus later suggested can never be totally eliminated? What values remain, what embargo is there on violence and cruelty, if all is nothingness? Unable to pass beyond good and evil as a proper disciple of Nietzsche should, and obsessed with violence all his life, Camus hovered about the problem of inner and outer darkness, which somehow he could not elude. In this regard, Camus's work remains as central to the accumulating horrors of our age as ever.

In the first sketch of the conclusion of the play, which was to be entitled, tellingly, *Caligula or the Awareness of Death*, the emperor appears at the end saying, "No, Caligula is not dead. He is there, and there. He is in each one of you. If you were given power, if you had courage, if you loved life, you would see this monster or this angel that you bear within you break out." So wrote the young Camus in his early notebooks in 1937, with all his yearning for personal happiness, for the absolute, for the unattainable—together with his confrontation of danger within and without. Caligula was the role that Camus the actor and actor-manager originally wrote for himself to perform with the theater company he ran in Algiers as a young man.

Like all his work, even the most seemingly detached, the play is intimately bound to his own personal concerns. Even Caligula's weird anguished reach for the moon could derive from personal reminiscence for, according to Camus's brother Lucien, their frustrated and dominating grandmother used to speak of "having the moon." In "Le Vent à Djémila" ("The Wind at Djémila"), Camus declared: "You live with a few familiar ideas. Two or three. As a result of chance

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encounters with worlds and men, you polish and transform them. It takes ten years to have an idea that is really your own—one you could possibly speak about." Then he added with characteristic irony, "Naturally, it is a little discouraging." His imagination returns constantly to a few vital experiences and images.

The mirror is one recurring image. The reflection of himself in the mirror that endlessly fascinates Caligula is and is not the true self, that goal of authenticity for the artist and actor whose sense of alienation and solitariness Camus identified in his notebooks. "Et tout m'est étranger, tout . . ." ("And everything is foreign to me, everything . . ."), owned the author of *L'Etranger* (*The Stranger*). Added to this feeling of estrangement was the detachment of the creative artist, of the observer of human conduct, and of the actor (as defined by Camus in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* [*The Myth of Sisyphus*]). Brought up under the French educational system to seek horizons beyond his working-class origins, Camus was an Algerian-born Frenchman who afterwards never felt quite at home either in Algeria or among the Parisian literary and intellectual élite.

Like his Caligula, Camus himself now stands before the bar of history: he, too, over thirty years after his death in a stupid car accident at the age of forty-seven, is very much alive. Among the signs of his enduring presence are two recent productions of *Caligula*, one of them given at the Comédie Française. The probing texts of a conference on Camus's theater, the most controversial part of his literary output (as distinct from his politico-cultural essays and journalism), have been published.[1] The fiftieth anniversary of that widely read novel, *L'Etranger*, influenced by the American "tough guy" school of James M. Cain, and first published in 1942 during the Occupation, has been duly celebrated in France.

Camus's fiction has long attracted filmmakers with intellectual pretensions like Luchino Visconti, who made a movie of *L'Etranger*, and Ingmar Bergman, who apparently regrets not having transferred *La Chute* (*The Fall*) to the screen. A new film has just been made of that strange allegory, *La Peste* (*The Plague*)—a work inspired by Kafka and Melville—by the Argentinian film director Luis Puenzo, who seems to have found similarities between Camus's Oran in the grip of the plague and the situation under dictatorship in his own country. One prospective filmmaker who wanted to film *La Peste* professed to see a link between the nihilism of Camus's era and that of the present day.

In addition to this activity, a selection of Camus's journalistic writings from 1944-47 in the Resistance newspaper *Combat* is now presented in English translation, with the evident conviction of their relevance to present-day affairs.[2] In his sharp account of the aberrations of French intellectuals, few of whom escape whipping, Bernard-Henri Lévy declares: "I am fond of Camus. . . . A writer who is scarcely ever found wanting in nobility and courage is exceptional. Besides, I am sure he was amusing." (Like Kafka, Camus had a humorous side, and he himself once remarked that people did not take sufficient note of his sense of humor.) Given all this interest in his work in the spheres of stage, screen, and the written word, it looks as if the end of the Cold War has not dimmed Camus's reputation. Instead, this epoch-making upheaval has perhaps moved the angle from which the writer can now be viewed.

To return to *Caligula*, first performed in 1945: it marks—along with Camus's adaptation of William Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun*, staged in 1956—a rare highpoint of his popular success in the theater. Each play offers an attempt to wrestle with the problem

1 *Albert Camus et le théâtre*, edited by Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi, IMEC Editions, Paris, 241 pages, 160 FF.

2 *Between Hell and Reason: Essays from the Resistance Newspaper "Combat," 1944-1947*, by Albert Camus. Selected, and translated from the French, by Alexandre de Gramont. Wesleyan/University Press of New England, 145 pages, $35; $14.95 paper.

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of evil in a life shorn of values. These dramas also reflect Camus's tireless (and possibly misguided) concern with the creation of a modern form of tragedy in an age that he found deeply tragic. (He thought that Faulkner's powerful baroque novel, composed in semi-dramatic form, was "one of the rare modern tragedies.") It is well known that the original production of *Caligula* owed much of its impact to the début of the young Gérard Philipe in the demanding title role. Delicate and vulnerable in appearance, with the innocent air of a perverse adolescent, and endowed with the inimitable musicality of his voice, Gérard Philipe (all who saw him agree) has proved without equal as Caligula in conveying charm, vanity, cruelty, and ambivalence. By common consent, his successors, in France and elsewhere, however talented in other respects, have mostly been competent but ordinary, lacking charisma, unable to efface the original image of a unique presence that can still be felt even in theatrical photographs.

So it was with the recent staging of *Caligula* at the Comédie Française. The production there, under the aegis of the noted Egyptian film director Youssef Chahine, took the form of an elaborate conflation of ancient and modern in the current fashion, a mélange of togas and motorbikes, Rome and North Africa—visually striking and even cinematographic where perhaps simplicity might have fared better. The producer was not averse to changing the order of scenes to suit his own purpose. But which is the "correct" text? There are several versions of the play, which occupied Camus at different moments between 1937 and 1958, as he moved the emphasis of Caligula's revolt from the sphere of the cosmic and metaphysical, where it was placed originally, to that of the political and social, from solitariness to the implication of solidarity with humankind.

Shattered by the sudden death of his sister-mistress Drusilla, the all-powerful young Caligula embarks on a series of arbitrary acts of folly and cruelty. He (like his creator), and not only when he is impersonating the goddess Venus, is an actor-manager of considerable talent. His destructive indifference to human life and human suffering springs, paradoxically, from a passion for life. His monstrous madness has a certain absurd literal logic to it, breaking the hypocrisy of conventionally accepted norms and forms. If, for instance, the Treasury is to be regarded as all-important, then clearly human life is not. He shares the bitter sardonic humor of the atheist Meursault, condemned to death in *L'Etranger*, who rejects the spiritual comfort offered by the priest by saying that he is not interested in the things that do not interest him. Caligula's one merit is that he tries to force people to think about the truth of their condition, though finally he is driven to acknowledge that, in acting against other human beings, "I have not taken the proper path, I have achieved nothing. My liberty is not the right kind." On the stage, the play remains dark, difficult, disconcerting, and challenging.

What did Camus see in this catalogue of horrors to occupy him for so long? The simple commonplace that human beings die and that they are not happy sets the young Caligula on his frenzied path to make life give up its secrets, to change life as it is commonly lived unthinkingly. Camus was only about seventeen, fond of swimming and playing football, when he was struck down by tuberculosis: he thought he was going to die; he dreaded nothingness with "that physical fear of the animal who loves the sun." He was to suffer recurrent attacks of this illness for the rest of his life—a matter that is often overlooked. Latterly, much has been made of the fact that—like André Malraux—he came late to the Resistance. Where Malraux's commitment took the form of armed resistance, Camus's involvement was moral, in the shape of clandestine journalism for *Combat*. As "Albert Mathé" he was also engaged in underground activity that carried considerable risks of imprisonment, deportation to the camps, death. Given the state of his health, his conduct should seem creditable enough.

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Camus's early years in Algeria had been marked by extreme poverty. His father, of French ancestry, was killed in the battle of the Marne in 1914 before the boy was a year old. His illiterate mother, of Spanish descent, found work as a cleaning woman to try to hold the family together. Yet such poverty, one possible source of his ill health, did not by his own account bring unhappiness, or preclude his profoundly sensuous and lyrical enthusiasm for the Algerian landscape, for the violent sun and radiant sea, the Roman ruins of Tipasa, the palimpsest of Djémila, all those life-enhancing elements of his youth that he would encapsulate in what he later liked to call the Mediterranean spirit. This was less an idea—to be scorned by academic philosophers—than a personal experience or response transformed into a value that would help to guard him (and, possibly, others) against the fearful destructive consequences of the powerful nihilistic ideologies that tempted him and his contemporaries.

It was not long before Camus's reputation was hedged about with misunderstandings. He was taken for the conscience of his age—a sort of French George Orwell—because he came to defend certain humane principles, and to advocate measure and the recognition of human limitations. Most notably he stood out against racialism, against the death penalty, against the criminality of "the end justifies the means," against the bloodshed of the would-be utopia of "the new man," against institutionalized murder on the grounds of "necessity" or for the supposed benefit of future generations. The Swedish Royal Academy, in awarding Camus the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957, cited his treatment of the problems facing the conscience of humanity at the time. Camus would scarcely have been human if he had not felt some gratification at his celebrity, at the path he had traversed from the poor district of Algiers. Yet he also knew that his fame as a kind of "secular saint" was a millstone around his neck, irritating some (notably one-time friends like Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir) and generally preventing people from seeing him as he truly felt himself to be.

Protest as he might, though, few appeared to pay much attention to his disclaimers. In a manuscript note to *L'Homme révolté* (*The Rebel*), Camus the Don Juan complained about the painful misunderstanding under which he labored: "I bear the weight of a reputation for austerity at once undeserved and rather ridiculous. If I have fought so firmly and uncompromisingly against those who legislated or killed in the name of the absolute, it is because I was aware of my own shortcomings and because I found only in them the permission to say that nobody is sufficiently just or pure to arrogate the right to judge without appeal. . . . Neither in my work nor in myself has there been an attempt to convert people to virtue but a logic that derives from frailty and a difficult struggle to attain to greater light. That is all." Years later, in an interview with the novelist and playwright Jean-Claude Brisville, published in 1959, Camus was still elaborating the same theme, declaring that his name as a guide and guru made him laugh.

Even in the very last interview he gave, in December 1959, he went on insisting that "I don't speak for anyone else: I've enough trouble to find my own manner of speech. I don't guide anybody: I don't know, or scarcely know, where I'm going. I don't live on a pedestal: I walk like everybody else in the streets of the day. I ask myself the same questions as men of my generation, that's all." In his acceptance speech in Stockholm he had quietly talked of being gifted with his doubts alone. "Why am I an artist and not a philosopher? It is because I think in accordance with words not ideas," he had once observed in his notebooks.

This tendency to work slowly and with no little effort toward a position that he can regard as true and just—one that is then held firmly and is publicly defended—may be traced throughout his life. What separates him from the "German friend" to whom he addressed those powerful "letters" in 1943-44? From an intellectual point of view, very little, it would seem, since they both derive

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from the same masters of nihilism, from Nietzsche and the rest. And yet it turns out to be a great deal, when Camus finally opposes the Nazi and his like, offering resistance in the name of humanity and justice. "I have chosen justice . . . so as to stay faithful to the earth," he wrote. "I continue to believe that this world has no supernatural meaning. But I know that something in it has meaning, and that is man, because he is the only being who demands meaning for himself." The determination to resist, to take a stand, has no sacred sanction, it is not rooted in some philosophical system. It is a free choice made from an inner propulsion ("I know"). Here, Camus's debt to André Malraux (in their photographs, even down to the manly cigarette ever hanging between the lips) is evident, in his attempt to rescue "man" from the forces that would destroy him. Camus's vocabulary derives from that of Malraux, in its assumption (characteristic of the day) that there is no need to mention woman in the definition of humankind.

Equally plain is Camus's debt to Henry de Montherlant's aristocratic view of "qualité" or nobility and a kind of Spanish point of honor. He shared Montherlant's reliance on scorn, and his distaste for the "shopgirl's morality" that in his opinion flourished under the Third Republic. Literature could still inculcate some of the attitudes of aristocracy even in those who were not born aristocrats. The seductiveness of Montherlant's writings lay in his prose, in his hedonism and his death-oriented nihilism. Yet ultimately Camus drew away from Montherlant. He came to reject Montherlant's stress on equivalence. For Camus, life cannot be regarded from the point of view of eternity.

A similar kind of slow development or revelation is to be found in the matter of the excesses of the purge at the Liberation. In the exaltation of the moment, in *Combat* on October 20, 1944, Camus could justify the purge in the name of a terrible law which obliged Frenchmen "to destroy a still living part of this country to save its very soul." Gradually, though, Camus moved away from his rallying call to revolution, from being the new "Saint-Just issuing alive from Malraux's *L'Espoir*," as a contemporary expressed it, in the immediate post-Resistance period. He turned into the journalist who wanted neither victims nor executioners. It is clear, then, that when in 1951 Camus published *L'Homme révolté*, his influential critique of revolution (as indeed with *Caligula* in 1945), he was not composing a detached study or work but was writing out of his own temptations as well as those he witnessed among leading fellow writers and intellectuals.

It is from this angle that we should now view *L'Homme révolté*, that mine which many writers have since worked and reworked, a book once seen as integral to the polemics of the Cold War. (Indeed, this influential book would soon connect with the horrors of the Franco-Algerian War, which raged from 1954 until two years after Camus's death, with the use of torture on the French side and terror on the other.) The notorious polemic instituted by Sartre and his spokesman, Francis Jeanson (who even today expresses no regrets), on the subject of *L'Homme révolté* remains central to the history of ideas and to the culture of our age. The tone of Sartre's reply to Camus, criticizing the loftiness of Camus's objections to Jeanson's review, is not just deeply wounding, it intends to wound. It would be tough on someone unknown to the author: addressed to a sensitive friend whose every vulnerable spot is familiar, it is cruel. Whenever afterward Camus declares that he does not seek to put himself on a pedestal, one can be sure that he is still smarting from Sartre's accusation that he carries a kind of "portable pedestal" around with him.

Camus's working-class origin is coldly discounted by Sartre, who levels at him the deadly charge of turning "bourgeois" and of betraying the proletariat and the Left. Unlike Sartre, he was not prepared to defend Communism and the USSR at all costs, supposedly in order to save the workers from the loss of hope, from the harsh truth of what was

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going on there. The one-time ardent young Communist of 1935-37, who grew indignant when the party line changed and the Algerian Moslems were left to their fate, and who was expelled for his pains, would always see himself as a man of the Left. He was neither a liberal (in the European sense) nor had he gone over to the Right Wing whose luminaries sought to co-opt him. Moreover, during the Cold War, despite his loathing of Soviet tyranny, he could not give his wholehearted faith to the United States because of the notion of "my enemy's enemy is my friend," and the policy of support for dictators, most notably for General Franco. Camus was extremely keen on his Spanish heritage through his mother, and he treasured his debt to it; he was emotionally attached to the distinguished actress Maria Casarès (daughter of Santiago Casares Quiroga, former prime minister of the Spanish Republic), who played leading roles in several of his plays; and his greatest friends in Paris were to be found among the Spanish Republican exiles.

Where Camus sought to take his stand was on truth and justice as he understood them: these were the great rocks that, like Sisyphus, he was endlessly pushing up the hillside to see them roll down again. His concern for them, and for moderation, came to save him from the self-righteous intransigence of Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and their allies as they favored first the USSR, and then Mao's China and each new and usually murderous revolutionary "utopia" in turn, in the name of a changed world and "the new man." In this way Camus eluded the deception, the lies, the passion for the extreme and, above all, the advocacy of the use of violence and the condonation of terror which besmirch the reputation of Sartre, Genet (if the word reputation may be used of him), and the Maoist intellectuals who followed.

This is not to say that Camus was lacking in a certain "nostalgia" (as his editor Roger Quilliot calls it) for the nineteenth-century Russian terrorists, like Ivan Kaliayev, who was responsible for the assassination of Grand Duke Serge in 1905—but then much of our culture is rooted in nostalgia for violence. Here was another contemporary temptation (see the celebrated opening pages of Malraux's *La Condition humaine*, with the terrorist's murder of a sleeping man). Camus depicted Kaliayev and his associates as "fastidious assassins" in *L'Homme révolté*, on which he was working when his play on the same theme, *Les Justes* (*The Just*), was first staged in 1949. They are seen as "fastidious," admired as pure, noble, and honorable because—unlike the terrorists of Camus's day and our own—they are ready to yield up their own lives after killing in the name of an ideal. As has been pointed out with regard to this specious view, murder is murder, no matter how refined the scruples of the assassin.

Certainly, by the time of the Algerian revolt, and the indiscriminate terror practiced by the FLN (the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale)—keenly supported and justified by Sartre and his circle—Camus made no secret of his opposition to political murder. He particularly scorned intellectuals who advocated terror and who sympathized with terrorists from the comfort of their armchairs. In a much commented-upon observation, he said that he put the life of his mother, who was still living in Algiers, first. In the end, with him as a writer and a human being, it was not just words but people that came before ideas.

A good deal of ink has been spilt over Camus's attitude to French colonialism in Algeria, especially by his judges on the Left or by the politically correct. Camus found himself in a cleft stick. By origin descended from settlers, he would have liked to keep a reformed, democratic Algeria linked to France. In his youth he had favored the reforms proposed by the Léon Blum-Maurice Vialatte bill, reforms that were stymied by powerfully entrenched French colonial interests. As a young journalist he had written a moving report on poverty among the inhabitants of the Kabylie region. He was outraged by the terrible repression of the uprising at Sétif in 1945, which left many dead. After all, he was brought up among

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Algerian Moslems, some of them future political leaders, who counted among his friends and acquaintances.

What he did not seem to take into account was the driving force of fanatical nationalism which, once unleashed, would inevitably propel Algeria to full independence, democratic or no. There was a certain naïve idealistic strain in Camus, one-time supporter of Gary Davis, the now long forgotten would-be citizen of the world. Camus tried to do what he could for peace and reconciliation: in January 1956 he went to Algiers to speak in favor of a truce. Events outstripped him. Thenceforward, fearing to aggravate the situation by public declarations, he intervened constantly behind the scenes on behalf of numerous Algerian Moslems who were on trial or in prison awaiting execution. The list of those he tried to save is long.

It was inevitable that the Franco-Algerian tragedy would leave Camus torn with ambivalent feelings. Central to his impassioned self-inquiry is the masterly monologue *La Chute* of 1956. There, Camus probed the theme of "Judge not, that ye be not judged," with its religious connotations. Now, after the Fall, nobody can be innocent. The work is a cry of critical and self-critical irony, issuing from his own profound self-dissatisfaction as well as from his acute perception of the self-righteousness and self-deception of his pontificating fellow intellectuals on the Left who judged him to be a traitor to the cause. That super-subtle former lawyer, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, heir to Diderot's eccentric personage, Rameau's nephew, has left France for Amsterdam, abandoning his profession, spending his time there in buttonholing strangers, like the one whose responses can only be gleaned from the words of Clamence himself.

Clamence's sustained sardonic confession provides at the same time a way of accusing everyone else. The details of his disquisition or indictment are left deliberately vague, and are constantly being called into question, so that his words have a wide reference. Are all of the utterances of this womanizing self-styled actor really true? There is reason to doubt it. The great sin of omission that (he claims) changed his life as a do-gooder of repute, his failure to respond to the cries of a drowning woman, can stand for all sins of omission and commission, all the acts that obsess the human conscience with the burden of guilt and destroy the virtuous self-image. The piece is a sustained dramatic parable where the judge-penitent flays human weakness in himself and in others: ". . . I am concocting a portrait which is that of everyone and no one. All things considered, a mask. . . . Yet, as the same time, the portrait I offer my contemporaries turns into a mirror," says Clamence. Here is a later version of Caligula's mirror—the reflection of the darkness within.

Where does Camus stand today now that the Cold War, in whose intellectual or cultural history he figured so largely, has come to an end? The collapse of the Communist system in the USSR and its former satellites has not actually eliminated die-hard Communism and the many shades and varieties of radical Left Wing sympathy. (The ability of members of extreme movements of Left and Right to shed skins in renewal, like the snake, has been witnessed countless times.) That collapse has merely shown up the bankruptcy and bad faith of the intellectuals who championed Stalin, Mao and the rest, and who whitewashed terror as a political instrument. Certainly, the cry of violent revolution as a substitute faith or a fashionable shibboleth is not being heard at the moment. In this sense, the mature Camus has been vindicated.

Yet to regard the end of the Cold War between the superpowers as a victory for liberal democracy and a new world order would surely be premature. Camus well knew that freedom—like truth and justice—has to be conquered. Violence and terrorism have not been erased from the imagination or from actuality. A Pandora's box of moral, political, and economic ills has now been opened: extreme nationalism, racialism, religious zealotry, "ethnic cleansing," together with

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Fascism and Nazism, have reappeared in late-twentieth-century Europe. An idea, however perverse, cannot be killed. It goes underground to re-emerge when times are ripe. In *Le Monde* of December 5, 1992, that well-known authority on Sartre, Michel Contat, could inquire whether Marxism has taken refuge in the catacombs.

Toward the end of Camus's allegory *La Peste*, there is a shatteringly resonant passage: "But he knew nonetheless that this chronicle could not be that of the conclusive victory. It could only be the witness of what had had to be accomplished and what, doubtless, all men . . . would still have to accomplish against terror and its tireless weapon. . . . For he knew what this joyous crowd did not know: . . . that the bacillus of the plague never dies or disappears, that it can remain dormant for dozens of years in furniture and linen, that it waits patiently in rooms, cellars, trunks, handkerchiefs and bundles of papers, and that, perhaps, the day would come when, for the misfortune and the education of men, the plague would reawaken its rats and would send them to die in a fortunate city." In *La Peste* the plague is not only Fascism and Nazism, perverse ideology, violence, injustice, inhumanity, dictatorship, and the Occupation of France: in one of its aspects, the plague is life itself and all the ills and evils that flesh is heir to. The warnings of Camus are there to remind us of a never-ending struggle where we are not granted to complete the work.

As Camus wrote in 1950 in an essay entitled "L'Enigme" ("The Enigma"): "In the darkest moment of our nihilism, I looked only for reasons to go beyond that nihilism." Not, he added, out of virtue or loftiness of soul but out of a passion for light and life. In Aeschylus, he suggested, there is an enigma, a meaning deciphered with difficulty because it dazzles the view. Something of that kind of enigma is to be found in his own works. Indeed, it is neither as a "secular saint" nor as the partisan of a particular cause that Camus should be viewed today, but as a fallible human being who made mistakes and was aware of many of his own shortcomings, who struggled for justice and decency, and whose writings stand as moving testimony to that struggle. He could be wrong at times, of course, but the amazing thing is how often he was in the right, and how much he still has to say to us in a dark hour.

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From the mattress grave: 3 late poems by Heinrich Heine

translated & with an introduction by Martin Greenberg

Heine moved to Paris in 1831, not intending an emigration at the time, but so it turned out. He delighted in the place. "When the fish in the sea ask each other how they feel, they answer, 'like Heine in Paris,'" he said. But he missed Germany too and never stopped missing it. "German shirts and German hearts/ Don't wear well in foreign parts" goes a couplet in one of his late poems. In 1848 he was literally struck down by a paralysis apparently syphilitic in origin. Never able to walk again, half-blinded by the illness, he lay doubled up in agony, an agony that morphine was less and less able to alleviate, on a bed of piled-up mattresses—his "mattress grave," as he called it—till his death in 1856. The courage with which he bore his long affliction surprised himself. Yet in these eight pain-ridden, opium-dazed years, tended by his illiterate Norman wife, Mathilde, he composed some of his best poems. It is one of poetry's many miracles. The three poems that follow issued out of that mattress grave.

Matthew Arnold called Heine a great "son of the nineteenth century," and in the nineteenth century his fame was very great indeed, worldwide. The French and English delighted in his wit: "so much wit with so much pathos," Arnold wrote in his very feeling essay—wit that lends pathos expressiveness, eloquence; pathos that gives wit a larger, richer content. Back home in German lands, his reputation was more mixed, for a variety of reasons, some of them quite bad; and as for wit—that is not a quality that wins first prize beyond the Rhine, especially when it's Jewish wit. Nor is our modern poetry greatly interested in wit, though that is not why Heine's reputation fell so steeply in the twentieth century. Modern poetry needed other sustenance and found it, among the Germans, first of all in Rilke, and before Rilke in such poets as Hölderlin and Kleist. However, Heine's poems from the mattress grave have not lacked appreciation. And in time one may expect that his earlier poetry will recover the esteem it deserves.

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Der Scheidende

Erstorben ist in meiner Brust
Jedwede weltlich eitle Lust,
Schier ist mir auch erstorben drin
Der Hass des Schlechten, sogar der Sinn
Für eigne wie für fremde Not—
Und in mir lebt nur noch der Tod!

Der Vorhang fällt, das Stück ist aus,
Und gähnend wandelt jetzt nach Haus
Mein liebes deutsches Publikum,
Die guten Leutchen sind nicht dumm;
Das speist jetzt ganz vergnügt zu Nacht,
Und trinkt sein Schöppchen, singt und lacht—
Er hatte recht, der edle Heros,
Der weiland sprach im Buch Homeros':
Der kleinste lebendige Philister
Zu Stukkert am Neckar, viel glücklicher ist er
Als ich, der Pelide, der tote Held,
Der Schattenfürst in der Unterwelt.

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His good-bye

Every vain wish, every worldly desire's
Died in my breast, ashes those fires.
And my hatred of evil—not a trace of it, nothing,
Lives in me still, not even my feeling
For the distresses I suffer, for others' distress.
All that's alive in me is death.

The play winds down, the curtain drops,
Yawning, the audience departs,
My dear German public who
Are nobody's fool—home they'll go,
Heap plates, fill glasses, laugh and sing,
Pleased with themselves, with everything.

That greatest of warriors, in Homer's book
Once said something right on the mark:
The meanest philistine in Stuttgart-on-Neckar
Who's alive and kicking—he's luckier
Than me, heroic but dead Achilles,
Pale shadow Prince of the House of Hades.

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Lass die heilgen Parabolen

Lass die heilgen Parabolen,
Lass die frommen Hypothesen—
Suche die verdammten Fragen
Ohne Umschweif uns zu lösen.

Warum schleppt sich bluten, elend,
Unter Kreuzlast der Gerechte,
Während glücklich als ein Sieger
Trabt auf hohem Ross der Schlechte?

Woran liegt die Schuld? Ist etwa
Unser Herr nicht ganz allmächtig?
Oder treibt er selbst den Unfug?
Ach, das wäre niederträchtig.

Also fragen wir beständig,
Bis man uns mit einer Handvoll
Erde endlich stopft die Mäuler—
Aber ist das eine Antwort?

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Enough with all the parables

Enough with all the parables,
With all the pious speculations,
No more beating about the bush—
Let's have straight answers to our questions.

Why does the just man, bleeding, wretched,
Stagger under a heavy cross,
While triumphantly the wicked
Ride around on their high horse?

Who's to blame? Maybe our Lord
Is not all that omnipotent.
Or *He*'s the one responsible?
Well, wouldn't that be a rotten trick!

So we keep on, quizzing life,
Until at last our time's run out
And our mouths are stopped with earth.
But what kind of answer's that?

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Gedächtnisfeier

Keine Messe wird man singen,
Keinen Kadosch wird man sagen,
Nichts gesagt und nichts gesungen
Wird an meinen Sterbetagen.

Doch vielleicht an solchem Tage,
Wenn das Wetter schön und milde,
Geht spazieren auf Montmartre
Mit Paulinen Frau Mathilde.

Mit dem Kranz von Immortellen
Kommt sie mir das Grab zu schmücken,
Und sie seufzet: Pauvre homme!
Feuchte Wehmut in den Blicken.

Leider wohn ich viel zu hoch,
Und ich habe meiner Süssen
Keinen Stuhl hier anzubieten;
Ach! sie schwankt mit müden Füssen.

Süsses, dickes Kind, du darfst
Nicht zu Fuss nach Hause gehen;
An dem Barrieregitter
Siehst du die Fiaker stehen.

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Memorial service

No mass will be sung for me,
No Kaddish recited either,
Nothing said and nothing sung
When I depart forever.

But maybe on a morning when
The spring has brought fine weather,
Frau Mathilde with Pauline
Will walk out in Montmartre.

With a bunch of immortelles clutched in
Her plump hand, she will come
And lay it on my grave and say,
Tears in her eyes, "Pauvre homme!"

A pity I dwell so high up,
Can't offer her a seat.
Look how the sweet thing totters on
Her tired, aching feet.

Dear, fat child, you mustn't go home
On foot, I insist, no, never!
See over there at the entrance gate
What's waiting for you, a fiacre.

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Art

The gatherers

by Jed Perl

I have never met the curator Douglas Blau, but after two visits to the exhibit called "The Naturalist Gathers" that he mounted at the SteinGladstone Gallery in November I feel that I have spent some time inside his brain. This astonishingly peculiar and haunting exhibition was entirely made up of small-sized photographs and other kinds of mechanical reproductions. There were two floors of—literally hundreds of—these images, each one in its own black frame. The show was about gathering images, and this is in and of itself a conventional subject these days, nearly three decades after Andy Warhol started silk-screening photographs and two decades after Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" became the downtown bible. Blau is very much of his time and place. He's a product of the unholy marriage of Andy and Walter. But he's reflected on his parentage with such attentiveness and erudition and crazed reverence that (at least temporarily) he makes that bizarre marriage make some sense.

The exhibit was itself a kind of self-portrait of the curator, who is an obsessive collector of ephemera. The majority of the reproductions he exhibited were of paintings, with some movie stills, some photographs of interiors clipped from magazines and newspapers, some nineteenth-century engravings. Many of the reproductions were blurry or obscure, and one was sure that so far as Blau was concerned this added to their romantic appeal. One was conscious that the man who'd organized this show had been culling, clipping, sorting images. And this theme of the obsessive collector was also the subject of many of the images included, which dealt with people looking at things, examining things, accumulating things. There were reproductions of paintings by Georges de la Tour and Vermeer and Hogarth, a still from the TV series "Star Trek," pictures of artists and scientists at work in many times and places, and many, many pictures of museums, galleries, libraries. This was a show about art and science in which everything was seen at second and third hand. Old paintings were seen in old reproductions. Actors were seen in dated performances. Blau dotes on the science fiction of the past. The whole exhibition could easily have been a SoHo cliché—another one of those meditations on our image dependency, on the (questionable) idea that our immersion in images makes us feel distanced and estranged. But Douglas Blau was so obviously caught up in the romance of the secondhand that he made one believe that this distanced kind of experience is an authentically dreamy kind of experience. After a walk around Blau's show I found myself stumbling out onto Wooster Street, unsure of where (or who) I was. Not many shows have that effect.

The main-floor gallery, which was the most interesting part of the show, was arranged so that as one walked clockwise around the room there was a gradual pro-

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gression from pictures of people (often artists or scientists) looking at inanimate objects to pictures of people (sometimes doctors) examining objects in a more active way to pictures of public collections (museums, galleries). The final images were of private collections—the studies and libraries of wealthy individuals in which the dream of possession becomes a reality. What I have just described is only a partial description of the contents of the main gallery. The exhibition was packed with information, and the mixture of familiar images (a photograph of Matisse drawing) and unfamiliar ones (an old painting of an anatomy lesson) kept a viewer engaged. (The upstairs display, mostly pictures of various arrangements of still-life objects, was less exciting.) Blau's taste for Neoclassical and Biedermeier interiors and emotions is au courant, as is his general sense of the nineteenth century as the childhood, magical but also nightmarish, of the modern imagination. The show might have been in part a critique of capitalist acquisitiveness, but Blau gave us such a quirky, detailed romp through the rapacity of the West, it was obvious that he was in love with all this stuff. Going through these pictures of dated interiors and dated objects, some might have been tempted to criticize Blau for what Cocteau (in his book *Portraits-Souvenir*) called "the good taste that sets yesterday's bad taste on a pedestal." That's the SoHo disease. But I would say that Blau understands what Cocteau meant when he wrote that what ought to interest us in the artifacts of yesteryear is their "sense of enigma, of meaningfulness. A room takes the likeness of its inhabitant. It is the costume of the soul, a costume which our soul distorts and has soon imprinted with its own contours. Once donned by the soul, a room becomes the cast of our deepest habits. Order and disorder cannot be counterfeited."

Going through "The Naturalist Gathers," thinking of the immense job of culling and sorting involved, I could not help but think of another gatherer of cultural debris. Blau is a curator and Joseph Cornell was an artist, but there is something Cornellian in Blau's project. "The Naturalist Gathers" brought to mind Cornell's excursions through the bookshops of Fourth Avenue, where he unearthed the pictures that would populate his constructions and albums and boxed homages to the ballerinas and singers of the nineteenth century. If there is such a thing as a Cornell tradition, "The Naturalist Gathers" is right smack in the middle of it. The show recalled Cornell's melancholy and quirky erudition, only presented now in a chilly, post-Minimalist package. Then again, a certain chilliness is not unknown to Cornell himself. In the penetration of his imagination Cornell was unique, but in another sense he was merely an early example of a type of artist quite common today: the artist who neither draws nor paints, who makes nothing that is not a combination of things that have already existed. The stirring melancholy of Cornell's work is related to its being all about the arrangement of found objects. It is an art based on displacements and reconfigurations. It is all, profoundly, old hat. Blau's "The Naturalist Gathers," in which the curator played at being a kind of artist, was grounded in a not unrelated view of the world.

Five years ago Blau organized a show called "Fictions: A Selection of Pictures from the 18th, 19th & 20th Centuries." There he mixed some of the type of material included in "The Naturalist Gathers" with paintings by contemporary artists who favor a slick naturalist-surrealist style, such as Mark Tansey and Mark Innerst. At that point, Blau struck me as the worst kind of trendoid, one who used quirky taste as a marketing strategy. (The two galleries that sponsored the show, Curt Marcus and Kent Fine Art, had an interest in some of the contemporary art involved.) In "The Naturalist Gathers" Blau was a different man. He had followed his taste to its logical conclusion, and he'd come up with an exhibition that was, within its admittedly *recherché* terms, a triumph. This was a show about a world where art has turned into imagery. Looking at all these pictures of people contemplating things, I could not help noticing how few of the people (including the artists) were actually doing anything.

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It was a show about people who are very often immobilized, people for whom contemplation is the ultimate experience. The show was about looking and accumulating impressions, about stuffing oneself with images. It was the creation of a man (Blau) who does not make things, but shuffles the things that have already been made. "The Naturalist Gathers" was a guided tour through the postmodern universe.

That Blau is a curator and not an artist does not strike me as by any means a negligible distinction, yet to many of the people who saw "The Naturalist Gathers" within the context of everything else that was going on in contemporary art this season, the distinction may have seemed insignificant. If Blau is a curator, then Damien Hirst, the English artist whose first one-man show in New York (at a new gallery, Cohen, on Madison Avenue) was called "Pharmacy," is a curator, too. Hirst's show consisted of pretty much what the title promised: a gallery turned into a pharmacy, with walls lined with glass-enclosed shelves packed with prescription medicines as well as a desk where the pharmacist might sit and fill orders. (The installation was finished off with some dishes full of honeycomb and an electric device for zapping insects.) There was nothing in the Hirst show that Hirst had made. He had merely chosen and arranged a number of things (and it was a far less interesting job of choosing and arranging than Blau had done). Nevertheless, there was a connection. Blau and Hirst are (to use Blau's word) gatherers. Theirs is an art of presentation—or, to borrow the title of a famous show organized by William Seitz at the Museum of Modern Art in 1961, "The Art of Assemblage." The interest of Blau's show had to do with its being about a world in which almost no one can any longer think of anything to do except gather. That orchestration of small dim reproductions was a brilliant mirror held up to an art world where everything that gets talked about is assembled out of something else: Cindy Sherman impersonates sex kittens and noblewomen, Jessica Stockholder resurrects Allen Kaprow, Mike Kelley recycles stuffed animals, David Salle appropriates the latest fashions in home decor, Meyer Vaisman puts bouffant wigs on stuffed turkeys, Jack Pierson spells out words with plastic letters, Rikrit Tiravanija rearranges the entire contents (lock, stock, and barrel, so to speak) of the backroom of the 303 Gallery. Since 1961, assemblage has never gone away, but has there ever been a moment when it was harder to avoid?

Context, juxtaposition, situation are by no means new words or ideas, but there is no question that they are the ideas that now hold sway. At "Fever," the immense group exhibition with which the alternative space called Exit Art inaugurated its new galleries on Broadway between Spring and Prince in December, there was a hall carpeted with inexpensive matching bathroom scales, a lit lightbulb automatically plunging into dirty water, jars filled with colored liquids, women's underwear on the floor, a cage containing a metal coffin, an orange tent in which hot drinks were available, a sort of shrine made of pebbles, broken glass, shells. Cross-dressing was another theme at "Fever," and that is in itself a form of assemblage, at least it can seem that way to the gallerygoer who looks at a photograph of a woman's wig on the head of a naked man. "Fever," the show itself, was an assemblage, a juxtaposition of disparate elements that was meant, when taken as a whole, to have a gritty urban feel. A few blocks away, at the Germans van Eck Gallery on West Broadway, there was "Mapping: An Index of Experience," where some of the parts were gritty but the overall look was clean, spare, bright. Tony Cragg's *Crackerboxes* (1986) was three old wood boxes filled with splintered pieces of wood. Curtis Mitchell weighed in with *Thursday '92*, a floor piece, with torn photographs tacked to boards that had then been broken into pieces. The photographs, when one bent over to take a closer look, were mostly of banal Middle American interiors and landscapes; there were also some broken bottles included. Then there was, at the Kasmin Gallery, now on Grand Street, a group

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show called "The Language of Flowers." Here the title was the key element in the arrangement, a nostalgic nineteenth-century title that gave lilt and charm to a canny compilation of pop floral motifs in Warhol, Koons, and many younger artists.

The new work made of found things can (when properly displayed) evoke just about any mood, from urban grunge to rococo nostalgia. The artists who do the work and the curators who organize the shows are nothing if not canny about how these particular productions fit into a larger context—into a history that goes all the way back to Duchamp's Readymades and Schwitters's Merzbau. This genealogy is something that the artists are able to take for granted, since it is by now part of the history books. A strong tradition of explication reaches back to the Dadaists and has been, since the Sixties, documented, interpreted, and expanded within more established, academic and museum contexts. The artists who are working with found materials in the 1990s are very much aware of both their avant-garde origins and their approving chroniclers and collectors in the academy and the museum. These artists have been blessed with many a laying-on of hands—and it's their sure knowledge that they have it all that gives their work its confident air. Without all that background I doubt that work this ephemeral could hold the art-world foreground. These artists are singularly fortunate—far more fortunate, certainly, than artists who nowadays paint and sculpt. Even as the assemblagists dominate the galleries, the museums step in to clarify any confusions that might remain as to origins and devolutions. The earliest efforts of Robert Rauschenberg recently received a comically elaborate presentation at the SoHo Guggenheim. And Eva Hesse's brief career, which is felt by many to have brought an expressionist force to industrial materials, has been the subject of a retrospective in New Haven and Washington, D.C. If this were not enough, now the Museum of Modern Art has published, as the second volume in its Studies in Modern Art series, a collection called *Essays on Assemblage*.[1] The main point of the volume, edited by John Elderfield, Director of the Department of Drawings at the Modern, seems to be to remind us all that assemblage has a long and honorable history at the Modern. With this volume, the Modern's serenading of SoHo, which began with the "High & Low" show of 1990, stays in high gear.

"The year 1961," Elderfield writes in his preface, "marked a notable stage in the history of assemblage, for . . . that was when The Museum of Modern Art mounted the exhibition 'The Art of Assemblage,' thereby giving the idea a name and official sanction. A great deal of controversy was generated in the process." Controversy there may have been, but the effect of *Essays on Assemblage* is to underline the "official sanction" and pretty much sidetrack the "controversy." The book contains essays on works by Malevich, Schwitters, Miró, Rauschenberg, but the section that will most interest readers is the full transcript of a symposium that was held at the Modern on the occasion of the assemblage show. William Seitz moderated, and the panelists included Marcel Duchamp, Robert Rauschenberg, the veteran Dadaist Richard Huelsenbeck, the historian Roger Shattuck, and the critic Lawrence Alloway. This was a very interesting symposium, especially the contributions by Duchamp and Shattuck; and yet there is, at least in retrospect, something deeply depressing about the delicacy with which William Seitz, as moderator, and some of the participants elucidate events and artifacts that even a few of the sympathetic commentators may have believed had their limits as works of art. Now here is that discussion, presented with elaborate footnotes by Joseph Ruzicka and an introduction by Shattuck that is itself a kind of miniature jewel of social history. Shattuck recalls the difficulties that Seitz had in getting travel money for Shattuck to come

1 *Essays on Assemblage*, edited by John Elderfield. Studies in Modern Art, No. 2. Harry N. Abrams/The Museum of Modern Art, 184 pages, $40; $25 paper.

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to New York. "In the early sixties, international symposia of jet-set intellectuals and artists had not begun. Transportation was still primarily by rail and ship. . . . Seitz had to engage in special pleading with higher echelons in order to obtain one hundred seventy-two dollars to pay my round-trip airfare from Austin, Texas." When the panel gathered for dinner on October 19, 1961, what first struck Shattuck "was that everyone pronounced *assemblage* as a French word except me, a teacher of French." And then there was the somewhat drunken dinner. Seitz "had set out on the table where we dined as many whiskey bottles as panelists. (Wine was not yet in fashion.)"

Roger Shattuck was far and away the most interesting of the participants. He made an important distinction between two kinds of juxtaposition that appear in modern art. "In certain cases," he said, "juxtaposition cancels out . . . and in other cases it keeps its level of tension." In the first category he put "the fur-lined teacup [by Meret Oppenheim] or the lumps of marble sugar [by Duchamp] or the corpse in the baby stroller [by Edward Kienholz]." These items, he said, "illustrate the association of two elements that cancel each other out and return us—spiritually and aesthetically—to zero. The process is essentially self-consuming, a reversion to dead level after an initial shock. A second form of juxtaposition—and I'm just making a distinction here—brings together two components whose conflict does *not* cancel out, but *persists*. The Cubists, and more erratically, the Surrealists, contrived to achieve this condition." Shattuck, in his memoir of the evening, says he was pleased to find that his idea that "scandal is unique," that "the event can happen only once per customer," was echoed by Duchamp, who said of the Readymades that "I realized very soon the danger of repeating indiscriminately this form of expression and decided to limit my production of Readymades to a small number yearly." These are brilliant men, and there is something peculiar about such great intelligence being brought to bear on the matters under discussion. (Of course Duchamp made a career out of that peculiarity.) Shattuck is forthright about how Dada ceases to be art. He says, "As the Smithsonian Institution houses airplanes that no longer fly, we may soon need a repository for works that have lived for a day. That would be a museum without art." This is brilliant—and exact. And yet does it not (did it not) occur to Shattuck that his saying this in an art museum makes it part of the history of art? William Seitz, Roger Shattuck, and Marcel Duchamp, with all their elegance of mind, can hardly be blamed for "Fever," an exhibit mounted at Exit Art thirty years later, but then again there is a connection. (I know people who, despairing over the neglect of so much serious contemporary art, look to history to settle the score. I wonder why. History—and that includes art history—is horribly unfair.)

Duchamp, in the witty close to his symposium statement, remarked that "since the tubes of paint used by the artist are manufactured and readymade products, we must conclude that all the paintings in the world are 'Readymades Aided'—and also works of assemblage." This remark would strike me as wonderfully funny, except that it is so tragically exact a description of the attitude that is today taken toward painting among many serious gallerygoers. Much of what is most celebrated in painting today uses paint as an extension of an assemblagist aesthetic. This is the case with the works of Jasper Johns and David Salle, who are, like Duchamp before them, men of obvious intelligence and considerable deadpan wit. Johns's work is an iconographic fun house. Going through the recent survey of Johns's career that was mounted by Leo Castelli to celebrate the thirty-five-year association of artist and dealer, I appreciated the canniness and elegance of Johns's juxtapositions and allusions. By now he's so impeccable an assemblagist, he will only permit the bits and pieces of the world into his paintings through the medium of Duchamp's Readymade Aid—the tube of paint. But the problem with his paintings is the inveterate problem of the assemblagist—his work is all juxtaposition, a

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series of stand-offs that have no resolution, no resonance. The problem with assemblage as an enduring aesthetic is not entirely overlooked in the 1961 symposium. Shattuck knows the dangers; he knows that there are kinds of unity in art that go way beyond juxtaposition. And didn't Duchamp, somewhere deep in his Dadaist heart, know that painting was the main event and that he'd abandoned it because he wasn't any good at it? But whatever the reservations of men of taste, at "The Art of Assemblage" it was felt that history was on the assemblagist's side. Seitz, in the catalogue of the show, was very good at bringing in the evidence of history. "The themes beginning to pass through the doors of art museums are (once again, as in the days of Courbet) those described by Gide as 'the squalor of reality.'" With Courbet and Gide in the vicinity, who would dare bad-mouth Edward Kienholz? Seitz was a man of wide learning, evident taste, and deep seriousness, but, oh, how timid he was before the onslaught of the present. History, rolling onward, was so interesting, and the curator would not dare miss the next turn in the road. "Surely pseudo innovation should never be embraced because it seems to be *le dernier cri*. Yet . . ."

Art and history are two different things, and the history of assemblage, which is flourishing all around us, has amounted to very little so far as art is concerned. Save for the use of some found materials in Joan Snyder's recent paintings, I cannot see much good that has come of assemblage in current art. But I think the trouble with assemblage goes back a long way, all the way back to Kurt Schwitters (whose *Cherry Picture* is the subject of a long, inadvertently hilarious study in *Essays on Assemblage*, which focuses on the mysterious thirty-year migration of a cork from one place in the composition to another). Schwitters is revered as a modern master, but whatever the intrinsic interest of his work, I think his poetry is limited and his influence has been a bad one. When found elements become the very fabric of the work of art, as they do in Schwitters, the artist has in some sense already given up the ability to create.

The gathering and juxtaposition of found objects that begins with Schwitters has its formal wit, but it is also the beginning of a line of thinking that results in the fashionable chaos that is Exit Art's "Fever" show. *Essays on Assemblage* makes a historical case for contemporary trends, never more so than in the essay on Miró, which emphasizes his Surrealist interest in the superiority of collage to painting, something that Miró may have entertained for a time but which has nothing much to do with the ultimate shape of his achievement. Even as Schwitters was making assemblage the subject of his art, Picasso and Braque were moving away from collage, which in the end they obviously saw as inimicable to the full exercise of artistic freedom. Douglas Blau's "The Naturalist Gathers" was, as I see it, an allegory of an art world which has given up its artistic freedom as it has more and more accepted the assemblagist mentality. The despair that seems to be overtaking so many of our best artists is closely related to the pervasiveness of the assemblagist mentality. The painter or sculptor is a maker, and the makers do keep making things, but they are more and more finding themselves trapped in a world full of gatherers.

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Theater

Saints & sinners

by Donald Lyons

Anna Christie is seventy-two now; Anna Christopherson herself would be ninety-two. And why not? All that salty sea air could have been an ideal preservative. The play won Eugene O'Neill his second Pulitzer Prize in 1921 and may be said to have begun serious American theater. Its large simplicities of theme and construction are well known: a prodigal daughter returns to her father's barge and strives, with some success, to exorcise her own and her father's past. Of course, it was not Anna who had been prodigal, but her parents, who had farmed her out to cousins in Minnesota. There, as she tells her father, one of them "that you think such nice people—the youngest son—Paul . . . started me wrong. It was none of my fault." Raped thus at sixteen, she went to Saint Paul and worked as a nurse until the breaks drove her to "a house." She hates men—"every mother's son of 'em."

The exciting new production of *Anna Christie* at the Roundabout seizes on what is living in the play—the drive of the central pair, Anna and her brutish Irish stoker, Mat, toward redemption—and downplays what is dated—the sodden maunderings of Anna's father, Chris Christopherson, about sea and fog. This amounts to a revaluation of the play. *Anna Christie* evolved from a "sea play" called *Chris Christopherson* that concentrated upon the seadog father, a character O'Neill knew and doted on from his days of frequenting waterfront bars in New York. There *is* a daughter in the earlier version, but she is a tea-drinking, English-bred, tweed-wearing secretary! Our Anna drinks, of course, whiskey, "with ginger ale on the side"—these opening words were, famously, Garbo's first spoken words on the screen when she essayed the role in 1930. Eric Bentley's verdict on the final play is that it "proceeded splendidly for one full act but then went to pieces in the effort to become a full-length play. The tragedy of 'old davil, sea' and its victory over Chris Christopherson was spoiled by the comedy of Anna and her Irish boyfriend. Two one-acters do not make an integrated full-length play, and O'Neill confessed his own dissatisfaction with the result." Eric Bentley goes on, be it said, to praise the play's innovative "colloquial dialogue," its "blend of vernacular with a kind of artifice that wavers between rhetoric and lyricism"; the essay in which these judgments appear, "The Life and Hates of Eugene O'Neill," contains many wise and eloquent remarks. But his verdict on *Anna Christie* is puzzling. *What* tragedy of Chris Christopherson?

Eric Bentley does well to speak of the "comedy" of Anna and Mat. Comedy in both senses: formally, for there is a happy ending; and tonally, for there is some occasion to laugh. O'Neill himself was indeed uncomfortable with the play he wound up writing. He squirmed at its conclusion, declaring to Broadway pundit George Jean Nathan that "the happy ending is merely a comma at the end of a gaudy introductory

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clause, with the body of the sentence unwritten. In fact, I once thought of calling the play *Comma*." The author felt guilty for not having produced a formula O'Neill tragedy about (in the words of commentator Virginia Floyd) "a flawed tragic heroine and two secondary male figures all held captive by their superstitions and premonitions [and] doomed to tragedy." Poor, masochistic O'Neill: unable to savor the human warmth and humor in what he had in fact written, he yearned to have given birth to a Strindbergian drama of hatred, an anticipation of *Desire under the Elms* or *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

What British director David Leveaux, set designer John Lee Beatty, costume designer Martin Pakledinaz, and lighting designer Marc B. Weiss, not to mention the performers, have done is to fashion out of *Anna Christie* a romantic, Puccini-esque opera without music. They use the visual language of the theater to highlight, as starkly as possible, the emotional surges and washes of the play. Much verbiage, especially the father's moanings, becomes libretto. Chris's Swedish dialect and Mat's heavy brogue are not always intelligible, and it scarcely matters. It would matter, of course, if this were a great play, but it is merely a good play and its virtues can be polished at the expense of its vices.

The first act takes place in Johnny-the-Priest's waterfront dive in New York; it's a joint awash in the bonhomie of losers like salty Chris and his blowsy companion, Marthy (Anne Meara in a solid turn). Into it from a door on the right splashes a parallelogram of hard white light; into this light slouches sagging, beaten, bitter Anna. This light is both diagnostic and redemptive: diagnostic of Anna's malaise, as Marthy gets Anna's "number" at once and Anna Marthy's: "You're me forty years from now." They share whiskey and sisterly comfort until Anna is forced to act an uneasy comedy of innocence for her father, who welcomes the daughter he never knew on to his barge. The redemptive function of the light becomes clear only in retrospect.

The second act is on the open deck of the barge on a fogged-up night—an extraordinary set, gleaming with slick light refracted through a wet, embracing fog. Anna is a girl again, hair washed and skin clear; she is wearing an oversize orange slicker of her father's. The sea and the fog, to her father agents of destruction and determinism, have evidently revivified and regenerated Anna. Onto this deck stumbles begrimed stoker Mat Burke, clad in a stoker's apron (he's escaping some naval mishap, it doesn't matter exactly what). He is a primitive Irishman and responds to the apparition of Anna according to the categories of woman in his limited *Weltanschauung*: she is a mermaid; she is an easy woman; she is "a fine, dacent girl." He pours out to her his longings for Ireland and for the settled love of a good woman. Atop this stark libretto English actress Natasha Richardson and Irish actor Liam Neeson build a brute ballet of body. There is a large coffer center stage: around it they circle and on it they perch. Gradually they find in each other—literally, in each other's bodies—a refuge from the storm. The blunt carnality of the muscular, half-nude Mat is accepted and gentled into shapes of love by the wary but warming Anna. Aristotle called the male form and the female matter; that is reversed in this powerful, sexy encounter. And throughout this large-souled passage, the characters are saying things like, "Are you kiddin' me?" or "Are you crazy?" Later, Chris emerges from inside the barge and interposes his body and his will between the lovers. Chris's unbudgeable and tediously iterated hostility to Anna and Mat's love is never given an adequate rationale by O'Neill, either psychological (e.g., an incestuous obsession à la *Mourning Becomes Electra*) or narrative (knowledge of some dark impediment in Mat or in Anna). It is kept on a rhetorical level—the sea does not want it, etc.

The third and fourth acts take place inside the barge. There is a table in the center and various fragile chairs about. The third act is the act of revelation, as Anna insists on explaining why it is she cannot marry Mat. She

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makes brutally, even accusingly, clear the damage done her by sexual abuse and the unfairness of her being soiled by her prostitution while clients "like you [Chris] and Mat" are not. But she has, she says, been changed, changed by the sea and changed by love. "Loving you [Mat] has made me clean." At the end of her confession, she sits in a chair, expectant. Mat raises a chair over her. The powerful playing of Richardson and Neeson sweeps aside any reservations about the material like a diesel locomotive going through a wooden fence. With a curse on Anna, Mat dashes off to get drunk. Anna has a snort, too.

The last act is one of reconciliation and resolution, first of Anna with her father. "I forgive you now," she sobs. "It wasn't your fault; it wasn't my fault." Here Rip Torn's Chris rises from "character" acting to character (of course, the role's deficiencies are not to be laid at the door of the actor). This wrenching movement away from blame and toward forgiveness, parental and filial, for all the human imperfections that have so scarred the past, is made by O'Neill here in 1921 as clearly, if not so richly or symphonically, as it will be in his final masterpieces like *Long Day's Journey into Night*.

Mat staggers in after a long bender; he is a befogged mix of anger, blame, love. "How are you any better than I was?" asks Anna, unanswerably. After declining to blow each other's brains out with a revolver, they kneel to each other and make peace with another token: a crucifix of Mat's mother's. (Potent confluence of Irish values there.) Anna swears she has loved only Mat. Then a comic moment as dim Mat thinks to ask: "Is it Catholic ye are?" No. "Is it any religion at all ye have?" Informed that the Christophersons are Lutheran, he swallows hard and agrees enthusiastically to marry Anna tomorrow. He and Chris are off to sea at once on, coincidentally, the same ship. Anna toasts the sea.

Gloomy Chris opens the door and predicts dire things from the sea, and from the fog, which comes pouring in on the three souls, frozen in place.

This *Anna Christie* is a triumphant retheatricalization of a valuable early O'Neill. Natasha Richardson's and Liam Neeson's whole-hearted, full-throated embrace of and submission to the material give them the very means to transcend it. This is acting without attitude, but with passion. (It must be insisted, though, that O'Neill gave them a vehicle which, though creaky, still holds the road. It was otherwise with recent attempts by Natasha's mother, Vanessa Redgrave, in Tennessee Williams's *Orpheus Descending* on Broadway and by Natasha Richardson herself in Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer* on TV. Both Williams contraptions have no engines.)

Anna Christie got into some trouble with the sex police. The *Times*'s Sunday reviewer accused its characters of "a suffocating narrow-mindedness"—the opposite, doubtless, of the now obligatory inclusive-mindedness. He focused on Mat, "the male chauvinist pig" (a locution of yesterday that is now more dated than the "ole davil sea" patter of 1921). Mat's insufficient feminism one can "explain, perhaps, but not justify. I fear the character remains stubbornly unsympathetic to the end." Mat and Chris were cruelly and stupidly judgmental about Anna, were shown to be so by Anna and by O'Neill, and expiate their sins. Today it is Mat who is denied sympathy, forgiveness, redeemability by the stony guardians of emotional correctness. O'Neill, a casualty of it himself, hated the hard-hearted Puritanism of his day. I am confident he would have spotted today's Mrs. Grundys for what they are.

As late as 1941, Eugene O'Neill, still uneasy at the redemptive possibilities latent in *Anna Christie*'s finale, wrote that "I couldn't sit through it without getting the heebie-jeebies and wondering why the hell I ever wrote it —even if Joan of Arc came back to play 'Anna.'" The reference came easy, for, two years after his Anna, George Bernard Shaw had put "saint" Joan definitively on stage in a clever and touching play. Shaw's heroine has this in common with Anna Christie: a moral sagacity about people and an intellectual ap-

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petite for the real that can confound the ideologies of the men around her.

The good news about the National Actors Theatre production of *Saint Joan* is that the company has risen to competence. Under the directorial guidance of Michael Langham, a long-time veteran of the Stratford Shakespearean Festival in Canada and of the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, the pageantry of *Saint Joan* is here realized in the manner of a superior summer theater. (And the script is intelligently trimmed, too.) Of course, *Saint Joan*'s pageantry is really a deliberate antipageantry. Scorning the vulgar opulence of the Victorian stage, Shaw depicts not a battle but a change of wind, not a coronation but the dispirited aftermath of a coronation, not a burning but a wretch's repentance after the burning, not a resurrection but another squalid betrayal. Still, there is room for a certain panache in a respectable staging of *Saint Joan*, and Marjorie Bradley Kellogg's siege engines and wind-bestirred gonfalons and cathedral columns have a sober imposingness that works very pleasingly. And I was impressed by Maryann Plunkett's chunky, no-nonsense, all-business Joan. There is not an ounce of glamour or of "spirituality" about her, and so much the better. She's more a (young) Bella Abzug than a Shirley MacLaine. I exaggerate. And I mean to praise. Ms. Plunkett's meat-and-potatoes style did not register on me much in the dreary *Crucible* last year, and her Masha in *The Seagull* needed paprika, but here she is nourishing. I cried when she died.

Like Joan, Plunkett is surrounded by men of varying degrees of ability and pomposity. Michael Stuhlbarg as the Dauphin perhaps lays on the feckless effeminacy a bit thick. Among churchmen, Louis Turenne as Bishop Cauchon and Nicholas Kepros as the Inquisitor articulate their positions intelligibly, if never excitingly. As the Machiavellian Englishman Warwick, John Neville provides a sample of the vices of English acting: reliance on a mellifluous voice and supple phrasing to do the whole job of characterization; handsome poses in lieu of meaningful motion; going up in one's lines frequently. Joan's younger enthusiasts showed more spirit as actors, to go with their greater virtue as characters: Remak Ramsay as the English Stogumber; Jay O. Sanders as the Bastard; Edmund C. Davys as Baudricourt.

The audience I saw *Saint Joan* with was surprised and amused by the play's central conceit of Joan as unwitting avatar of Protestantism and of nationalism. And it cannot be denied that Shaw's ingenuity here, if historically dubious, is dramatically useful, for it goes some way toward making this story a tragedy according to the formula that Hegel, famously, applied to the *Antigone*: a clash of irreconcilable and equally valid principles. (If Joan stood for nothing more than ousting the English from Normandy and her destroyers for nothing more than English imperialism and Papal absolutism, then her tale becomes a pure melodrama of a saint burnt by the wicked.) I say it goes only *some* way for I dissent from the common opinion that Shaw really gives the bad guys all the good lines—or indeed any good lines—in *Saint Joan*. In the preface to the play, Shaw is remarkably friendly to and understanding of Roman Catholicism, but in the play there is no real case made for what are presented as the Church's actions toward Joan. The Inquisitor says that simplicity of dress leads to license and debauchery; he is motivated by love of wealth and fear of the body. Bishop Cauchon says independence of judgment leads to chaos; he loves his own power. It may, perhaps, seem surprising that Shaw, one of the century's most vocal cheerleaders for the likes of Stalin and Mussolini, should not have come up with a better case for power here, but the fact remains that he has not. Not that I think there *was* any case to have been made for Joan's judges. They acted evilly, and their invocations of order were a mockery of political philosophy and of religion. So *Saint Joan* is finally more Brechtian than Sophoclean, more a hymn to progress than a static standoff.

Once again, a *Times* writer has invoked the gender wars apropos of a play. Speaking of Ms. Plunkett, Mel Gussow wrote that "she seems to grow in stature, like Anita Hill

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testifying before a Congressional hearing." The possibilities are rich: Kennedy as the porky Cauchon; text-citing Hatch as the Inquisitor; Biden as the repentant Stogumber. . . . Anita Hill's testimony seems in a fair way to be becoming the *image-clé* of the new era. For example, there was recently to be a benefit reading of Shaw's *Don Juan in Hell* by literary celebrities: Gore Vidal as the Devil, Gay Talese as Don Juan, Susan Sontag as Ana, and Norman Mailer as the Commander. A depressing enough idea in itself, perhaps, but Gay Talese felt obliged to remark that "in the dialogue between Susan Sontag and myself, there are aspects that almost sound like something Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas would be debating." Oh happy Shaw, to have anticipated Anita Hill! Actually, it should be made mandatory that all theatrical representations allude to her. The NAT could stage the bare transcript—see makeup suggestions above. JoAnne Akalaitis would mount a postmodern deconstruction downtown at the Public. Philip Glass and Robert Wilson might do the opera at BAM. Soon it would be the *only* permissible text, like *The Red Detachment of Women* in the good old days when Jiang Qing (Mme Mao) was at the helm of the Cultural Revolution.

RECOMMENDED: The Jean Cocteau Repertory has put on their first Shakespearean comedy ever, *Much Ado about Nothing*. Robert Hupp stages this difficult work of mixed tonalities in a Sicilian arbor, complete with fountain and vines, *c.* 1910. Bicycles are ridden; pinchwaist suffragette gowns worn —it is a bit like one of those E. M. Forster movies. The irresistible Beatrice and Benedick are done with spirit and charm by Elise Stone and Mark Waterman, but it is the play's undigestedly near-tragic pair of Claudio and Hero (the excellent Steve Chizmadia and Angela Vitale) that arrests the attention. Their wedding, brutally interrupted by Claudio; Claudio's repenting at a pillar in Hamletlike tights and attitude; and the solemn interment of Hero—all have a power and focus wanting in the surrounding comic byplay. Hupp has had the excellent idea of having the (really living) Hero present, veiled, at her own funeral to view the anguish of Claudio, which he has more than coming to him. In these episodes we can glimpse the seeds of things that were, matured, to become *Measure for Measure* and *A Winter's Tale*. The problem, here as in *Anna Christie*, was to make palatable to a contemporary audience a woman's forgiveness of a man's savage stupidity.

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Books

Reading Henry Green

by Brooke Allen

Henry Green is one of the literary enigmas of the twentieth century. Twenty years after his death, posterity seems still to be groping for an evaluation of his slim *oeuvre*—nine novels and a memoir,[1] all produced between 1926 and 1952, when he stopped writing at the age of forty-seven. "I find it so exhausting now I simply can't do it any more," he told an interviewer, though he lived on for over twenty years, increasingly eccentric and reclusive. He refused even to leave his London house for the last seven years of his life, nor would he consent to being photographed except from the rear. In 1973 he died, a very old sixty-eight.

He achieved neither commercial success nor wholehearted enthusiasm from the literary pundits, though he commanded, then and now, excitement amounting to passion from certain readers, an oddly assorted group including W. H. Auden, Elizabeth Bowen, Terry Southern, Eudora Welty, and John Updike. About his readership he exposed the ambivalence that characterized every attitude he ever held. "I write for about six people (including myself) whom I respect and for no one else," he claimed, though he never gave up the vain, one might even say deluded, hope that his work would one day bring in a comfortable income. So oblique and subtle is Green's style that, as Terry Southern points out, he has been called not merely a writer's writer but a writer's writer's writer; yet he himself criticized Joyce and the later Henry James for allowing the excesses of their styles to hinder communication between author and reader.

If Green's working aesthetic was delicate, allusive, and cryptic, it was in mysterious contrast to the anti-intellectualism he otherwise affected. He despised literary conversation, preferring flirtation and gossip. Though he read about eight books a week, according to his son, Sebastian Yorke,

> the standard of the novels never seemed to matter. . . . He rarely praised a book; there were some American authors he would admit to liking, but he seemed to admire no contemporary English writers. He never re-read a book or selected one from his small library of 'classics' collected in his Oxford days. Nor can I recall him reading anything by his professed idols: Gogol, Turgenev, [C. M.] Doughty [the author of *Travels in Arabia Deserta*], Céline or Faulkner. He only liked novels—he would not read poetry or biography. He loved thrillers and magazines, particularly *Time* magazine.

This most artful and self-conscious of writers was very clearly uncomfortable in the role of artist. The discomfort was perhaps inevitable when one takes into consideration the fact that Green never rejected his decidedly philistine background.

1 *Blindness* (1926); *Living* (1929); *Party Going* (1939); *Pack My Bag* (the memoir, published in 1940); *Caught* (1943); *Loving* (1945); *Back* (1946); *Concluding* (1948); *Nothing* (1950); and *Doting* (1952).

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It seems fitting to follow Green's own careful differentiation between his literary and non-literary selves and to call him by his pseudonym when speaking of his work and by his real name, Henry Yorke, when speaking of his life. Henry Vincent Yorke was born in 1905. His father was the owner of a large Gloucestershire estate, and the chairman of the Birmingham engineering works of which Henry was to become managing director, H. Pontifex & Sons. (With his usual love of the grotesque, Henry liked to claim that the firm manufactured toilets, though its principal products were in fact beer-bottling machines.) His mother was a daughter of the second Baron Leconfield. Henry Yorke was thus not only an aristocrat but an industrialist as well. Anthony Powell, a lifelong friend, remarked that "if one side of Yorke found the silver spoon a handicap to respiration, another accepted it as understandably welcome; and coming to terms with opposed inner feelings about his family circumstances, his writing, his business, his social life, was something he never quite managed to achieve to his own satisfaction."

Apart from his writing, Yorke led a fairly conventional life. He was not academically brilliant like his father and older brothers; though he was a published novelist while still an undergraduate, he left Oxford without a degree. He then began working for Pontifex, spending his first year on the shop floor with the men before joining the management in London. He passed the rest of his working life with the firm, living in a comfortable house with his wife, Dig (Adelaide), and their son. Though Yorke was not a successful industrialist, he was a dedicated one, and he never let his writing take precedence over his business responsibilities. His books were written in his spare time and his habits were those of any upper-middle-class businessman; he abhorred all things bohemian. It has become customary to refer to him, in his youth, as a Bright Young Thing, but the cliché is misleading: Diana Mosley, writing that "The Bright Young People [was] an expression that always made us laugh," says that she and her circle used it "of our particularly serious friends, Bright Young Roy Harrod or Bright Young Henry Yorke."

Green's unwillingness to pontificate about aesthetics has resulted in a general critical uncertainty about his actual importance as a writer. His books are rarely in print [2] and, though he receives a few passing glances from the academy, an enthusiasm for Green is now seen as evidence of specialized, even arcane, tastes. When speaking of his work, people hesitate to commit themselves, usually saying that he is an *interesting* writer, *but* . . . For if it is difficult completely to swallow Green's demanding, often precious prose style, it it also impossible to write him off. And the extraordinary range of his gifts is indicated in the fact that, among the nine novels, there is virtually no repeat material; each novel attempts something wholly different from the last. Green was not one to develop a style or theme over the years, building onto it with every new book. Rather, with reckless confidence, he attacked each novel as though it were his first.

Nor did Green ever attempt to take the easy route in his writing. He always reached for extremes, sometimes becoming labored in his wish to avoid the elegant and the Augustan. His own literary tastes were for the strenuous, the magnificent, the muscular: Carlyle and Doughty were lifelong passions, and his admiration for James and Woolf is unsurprising. In *Blindness*, his first novel, begun and mostly written while he was still at Eton, Green had already begun seeking the limits of the possibilities of English syntax, and in his second novel, *Living*, he found those limits and began to stretch them.

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2 Until last month, and for most of the Eighties, the only Green title available in the States was *Concluding* (University of Chicago Press, 254 pages, $9.95 paper). Now, two paperback omnibus volumes, *Loving, Living, Party Going* (528 pages) and *Nothing, Doting, Blindness* (504 pages), first published in the late Seventies, are back in print from Penguin Books ($14.95 each). In May, New Directions will publish, some fifty-three years after the British original, the first U.S. edition of *Pack My Bag* (256 pages, $18.95).

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A certain degree of failure, of course, was inevitable, and the diversity of Green's achievements is matched by a corresponding variety in quality. In one paragraph he will hit the bull's eye with a magnificent felicity of phrasing, in the next he will overreach himself and produce a piece of prose that is very bad indeed. He could produce a vivid image with a minimum of words, and Green was always strongest when handling the concrete, either in descriptive prose or in dialogue. In *Nothing*, for example, a young couple enters a French restaurant without having reserved a table: "They were standing before Pascal, close together in an attitude of humility while Gaspard sneered in their faces. It was plain they were not known." By the same token, Green's stylistic exertions can be disastrous. His omission of the definite article in many of his early stories and in *Living* is a case in point. "I wanted to make [my prose] as taut and spare as possible," he later said, "to fit the proletarian life I was then leading." Intermittently, the trick is effective, producing scenes of great beauty, as in this passage from *Living*:

> Mr Craigan smoked pipe, already room was blurred by smoke from it and by steam from hot water in the sink. She swilled water over the plates and electric light caught in shining waves of water which rushed off plates as she held them, and then light caught on wet plates in moons. She dried these. One by one then she put them up into the rack on wall above her, and as she stretched up so her movements pulled all ways at his heart, so beautiful she seemed to him.

In 1958 Green said that he would not employ this technique again, giving as his reason that "it may now seem, I'm afraid, affected." And so it does, especially when he insisted upon the principle too dogmatically:

> Sang birds. They lay, arms round each other. Waved ferns in the wind and they were among them, lying silently. Above trees hung a cloud against blue sky and leaves clustering from branch above and tall ferns hid these two deep in the wood from anyone and the sky. Soft the air.

The conceit is audacious, and in order for it to succeed each sentence must be perfect; even a slight bungling is enough to make an entire passage ridiculous. Green's style thus often descends into pure mannerism, and it is certain that he has antagonized many readers who ought otherwise to be favorably disposed to his work. Both Southern and Updike describe Green's "tendency toward authorial invisibility," but in fact precisely the opposite is true, for there is never a moment, even during Green's smoothest displays of ventriloquism, when the reader could possibly mistake his work for that of any other author. *Concluding*, a case in point, establishes atmosphere with such obsessive detail that it becomes a book about atmosphere to the exclusion of everything else. *Caught* is another novel in which style takes center stage; Green focuses so single-mindedly upon re-creating nuances of voice and dialect that the central psychological situation is finally consumed within the showy display of fine characterization. Orville Prescott complained of Green's "excessive concentration on method rather than matter," and Philip Toynbee called him a "terrorist of language"; "'the,'" he wrote, "is both an innocent and a useful word and to concentrate so heavy a gun against it seems a curious misdirection of this writer's fire-power."

These censures are too often merited. But in a masterpiece like *Loving*, where Green was able so exquisitely to modulate his idiom to suit his glorious and trivial subject, the reader forgets all of Green's sins in pure admiration of his virtuosity.

> 'Oh Edie,' he gasped moving forward. The room had grown immeasurably dark from the storm massed outside. Their two bodies flowed into one as he put his arms about her. The shape they made was crowned with his head, on top of a white sharp curved neck, dominating and cruel over the blur that was her mass of hair through which her lips sucked at him warm and heady.

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> 'Edie,' he muttered breaking away only to drive his face down into hers once more. But he was pressing her back into a bow shape. 'Edie,' he called again.

This novel about the goings-on among a group of servants in a great country house in Ireland during the owners' absence is, perhaps, the best-known and best-loved of Green's novels. It is characteristic, too, of one of the features that has made Green such an anomaly among English writers of this century: his apparent classlessness. Though Green can describe his own milieu, and brilliantly (*Blindness*, *Party Going*, *Nothing*, *Doting*), he seems equally at home among the petty bourgeoisie (*Back*, *Caught*) and the working classes (*Loving*, *Living*). In fact he is perceived by many readers to be a writer specifically proletarian in sympathy and focus. But the fact that these same readers all tend themselves to come from the upper and upper-middle classes should alert us to be wary of this conclusion. Though *Living* has been called the "best proletarian novel ever written," Green himself was quick to point out that "the workers in my factory thought it rotten. It was my very good friend Christopher Isherwood used that phrase . . . and I don't know that he ever worked in a factory." Green's year on the works floor in Birmingham gave him a lifelong respect for the proletariat, and it is possible that *Living* celebrated that world with just a touch of romanticism. Though Green himself believed the proletarian inspiration to be central to his aesthetic, he led (except for the Birmingham period and his time in the Auxiliary Fire Service during the war) an unexceptionably upper-middle-class life.

And while Green was a member of the so-called Auden generation, he was entirely out of step with that group's philosophy of political commitment and activism. Throughout the Thirties (the decade in which Auden, Day Lewis, Orwell, and Upward, all Green's contemporaries and social co-equals, were producing literature of passionately left-wing inspiration), Green was engaged in the painstaking composition of *Party Going*, a novel which dwells almost exclusively upon the fatuous doings of a group of rich and aimless young people.

In reality Green was concerned less with any one social group than with the entire spectrum of human grace and folly. Rather than being divided by socio-economic factors, his characters, finally, are united by the vanity, greed, and generosity common to the species as a whole. It is not that Green was uninterested in the minutiae of social distinction; indeed, he liked to point out that there exist not three, or five, but hundreds of clearly demarcated social classes in England, and he spoke scornfully of "the English novelist's worst restriction—ignorance of life in all social classes but his own." Social distinction, however, manifested itself for him not as a monolithic or necessarily desirable aspect of culture but as yet another facet of the human race's ever-imperfectible nature. Inverse snobbery has caused critics of the last novels, *Nothing* and *Doting*, to belittle their "significance" because of the impenetrable frivolity of their upper-class characters. But these characters are not so very different in essence from the lower-class ones in *Loving* and *Living*, and the books' libidinous middle-aged men and scheming women are every bit as deserving of their happy endings as are *Loving*'s scoundrelly butler and less-than-honest maid. It is difficult to see where *Nothing* and *Doting* are more "trivial" (an insult often aimed at them) than any of the other novels. The pursuit of self-interest is to Green both natural and acceptable; Green, wrote V. S. Pritchett, is "inside the human zoo, preoccupied with it, and occasionally giving a sad startled look at the bars he had momentarily forgotten."

Hence the apparent moral vacuum that mystifies or repels those readers who demand from literature the affirmation of a system of values. Green's refusal to judge his unregenerate characters is absolute, as is his refusal to endow them with any of the redeeming features most authors allow. All of his creatures are commonplace in the truest sense of the word: they are without intellectual or spiritual interests, without

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philosophy, wholly lacking in curiosity about the rest of the world and even in self-knowledge. But they are comic rather than tragic, and their very humanity is ultimately a force for redemption.

Surviving: The Uncollected Writings of Henry Green, which appeared in England last year, is now being put out in this country by the Viking Press.[3] It is a valuable volume, adding substantially to the little we possess of Green's output. As well as stories, articles, and reviews by Green himself, it contains an introduction by John Updike, an interview from the *Paris Review: Writers at Work* series, and a superb memoir by Sebastian Yorke, who clearly inherited his father's love of the macabre and the absurd. The contents of this collection, according to the editor, Green's grandson Matthew Yorke, represent three quarters of the material in the slender Green archive. Arranged chronologically, the pieces begin with a schoolboy story dated 1923, and wind up with a short, eccentric self-portrait published in *The Spectator* in 1963. Fiction predominates in the Twenties and Thirties, essays and reviews from the Forties on.

The collection is interestingly named. *Surviving* suggests that the quality of the work continues to stand on its own merits—but how well does it, in fact, "survive"? The question is a difficult one to answer, for in the last analysis these pieces will probably be of interest only to the confirmed Green enthusiast. Green's reputation still must rest on his nine novels, and not on the material in this volume, which varies wildly in quality.

The short stories are of interest mostly for the light they throw upon the developing sophistication of Green's touch. Unlike so many novelists, Green did *not* produce his best work early in his career, for his particular vision, dark, morbid, and with a powerful sense of the ridiculous, is one which comes naturally with middle age rather than youth. In 1958 he stated, as though it were a generally-accepted fact, that "the whole of life is now of course absurd," and said that "most of us walk crabwise to meals and everything else. The oblique approach in middle age is the safest thing." It is this instinct for absurdity and obliquity—which he did not begin to develop fully until his thirties while writing *Party Going*—that is fatally lacking in the early stories of *Surviving*. Most of these are experiments in the use of language. They proliferate in the kind of syntactical excess that Green largely succeeded in purging from his novels, but they nevertheless contain strokes of brilliant originality.

The most considerable story from this early period is "Mood" (1926), the beginning of what was to have been Green's second novel, abandoned after twenty pages. It is a subjective narrative from the point of view of a young girl, Constance Igtham, upper-class, unmarried, somewhere in the no-man's land between childhood and adulthood. As she wanders through London the reader is made party to her mixed impressions and memories. One hesitates to call this narrative "stream-of-consciousness," for there are occasional, sometimes ironic, comments from the narrator (". . . she went everywhere and was everyone's bridesmaid. Constance was utterly charming. This book is about Constance. When you have read it you too will say how charming Constance is"). "Mood" is, in fact, remarkably close in technique and even subject-matter to *Mrs. Dalloway*, which had been published only a year before, and it confirms one's instinctive feeling that Green, in his visual power, his irony, and his insistence upon the caught impression, was a close artistic ally of Virginia Woolf's. (Green admired Woolf, calling her "one of the great women of our time," but he suspected that she was less enthusiastic about his own books and had taken him on as a Hogarth Press author purely as a favor to John Lehmann.)

"Mood," for all its beauties, is not wholly successful. Later in life Green was embar-

3 *Surviving: The Uncollected Writings of Henry Green*, edited by Matthew Yorke, with an introduction by John Updike and a memoir by Sebastian Yorke; Viking, 302 pages, $24.

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rassed by his youthful self's innocent use, in the fragment, of the most obvious Freudian symbolism, and he wrote that "to establish a girl . . . in a static situation where nothing is happening to her except her thoughts and feelings, is an impossible project for the novelist and one which only a young man, as I was then, would try for." Of course, other novelists have tried and succeeded in this venture; what Green really meant was that it was an impossible project for the kind of artist *he* was. For Green's most successful technique is the vivid presentation of significant surfaces: in his best work he never presumes to trespass upon his characters' thoughts or pasts. "Do we know, in life, what other people are really like?" he wrote. "I very much doubt it. . . . How then can the novelist be so sure?" Green's characters, as his work develops, communicate only by accident, as it were; they expose their real motives and passions not through straightforward thoughts and deeds but through chance actions and vacuous asides.

The quantity of the fiction thins out as Green ages, but its quality improves immeasurably. While the rhapsodic nature of the early work wanes, the cool, restrained tones that suited Green so well now make their appearance, and one very short story, "The Great I Eye" (1947), is as good a piece of fiction as Green ever wrote, a combination of macabre fantasy and bland realism. A hungover husband wakes on the morning after a party, trying to remember what exactly went on the evening before: it is a masterly, surrealistic story that grazes the mysterious and obscure origins of marital guilt, a subject to which the later Green returned again and again.

> We go about our daily lives, in great cities, thinking entirely about our personal affairs; perhaps every now and again sparing a thought for our partners, that is, the person we live with, and of course with even greater guilt, of our children. After a time, in married life, it becomes the other partner's fault that they have married one, but the only child, or, as chance may have it, the many children, have had no choice, they are ours, and this is what fixes the guilt on us.

This, from a 1954 essay called "Impenetrability," represents for Green not a passing mood but a deeply felt conviction. Another excellent and disturbing exploration of this theme is "Journey Out of Spain," a short, never-produced play that Green wrote for television. Ostensibly a variation on the hackneyed subject of the travel nightmare, in this case the apparent inability of an English couple to escape from the vile Spanish backwater they are visiting as unsuspecting tourists, the play is also a disturbing and sinister vision of the guilt, demands, and devouring selfishness behind the façade of a very conventional marriage. The sincere and almost religious conviction of the primacy of guilt in human relations is one of Green's most fruitful sources of inspiration, and he forcefully develops it in *Doting* and *Nothing*, his last, great, and dismally underrated novels.

Surviving shows the line of development in Green's fiction to be straight and strong, but his non-fiction—particularly his criticism—tends to be weak throughout his career. For while certain advantages accrue to an artist who remains purely an artist as opposed to a critic, he will tend to be shown up rather badly when he does turn to criticism. And Green's anti-intellectualism, worn like a badge of honor, finally turned into a terrible handicap. His thought processes were finely adjusted to every nuance of observed behavior, but when he tackled the abstract they became convoluted and clumsy, his usually delicate prose fumbling. In his only attempt at art criticism, for example, a 1953 essay on the painter Matthew Smith, he is tentative in every statement, as though fearful of sounding either foolish or pedantic. He obviously recognized the problem, for he said at the time: "I have never written about painting before and never shall again. It has given me hell." Some of his attempts at expository writing show just how bad things could get when he lost control:

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> Now that we are at war, is not the advantage for writers, and for those who read them, that they will be forced, by the need they have to fight, to go out into territories, it may well be at home, which they would never otherwise have visited, and that they will be forced, by way of their own selves, towards a style which, by the impact of a life strange to them and by their honest acceptance of this, will be as pure as Doughty's was, so that they will reach each one his own style that shall be his monument?

What a tangle! One can only fear that Green's style, too, will be his monument. As H. G. Wells said of the later Henry James, "his great sentences sweat and strain," and the more desperately he reaches for precision the further it retreats from his grasp. Green's essays on fictional technique also suffer from want of a frame of reference. In the Fifties he wrote several remarkably naïve pieces on narrative theory. Here, for example, is his case against the omniscient narrator:

> Writing in this sort of way the novelist speaks directly to his readers. The kind of action which dialogue is, is held up while the writer, who has no business with the story he is writing, intrudes like a Greek chorus to underline his meaning. It is as if husband and wife were alone in the living room, and a voice came out of a corner of the ceiling to tell them what both were like, or what the other felt. . . . What he tries to do is to set himself up as a demi-god, a know-all. That life has been so created in novels, in the past, is not for me to argue for or against.

It might be 1870 and Green inveighing against the despotism of Dickens and Thackeray, rather than 1950, with Proust, Joyce, and Woolf (to name only a few) already dead and buried; one would think the author didn't control what his creatures *say* as well as what they *think*, and that the novel had a life of its own independent from that of the author. The violence of his reaction to what he seemed to perceive as unquestioned literary convention is bizarre in view of the preceding century's achievements.

But fortunately Green the novelist never completely followed the dicta of Green the theorist. His art was both too delicate and too ambitious to yield to formulae, and indeed the reader who still turns to Green does so as much for his mysteries and illogic as for the frequent beauty of his style.

> A man falls in love because there is something wrong with him. It is not so much a matter of his health as it is of his mental climate; as, in winter one longs for the spring. He gets so that he can't stand being alone. He may imagine he wants children, but he doesn't, at least not as women do. Because once married and with children of his own, he longs to be alone again.
>
> A man who falls in love is a sick man, he has a kind of what used to be called green sickness. Before he's in love he's in a weak condition, for which the only prognosis, and he is only too aware of this, is that he will go on living. And, in his invalidism he doesn't feel he can go on living alone. It is not until after his marriage that he really knows how wrong or sick he has been. . . .
>
> The love one feels is not made for one but made by one. It comes from a lack in oneself. It is a deficiency, and therefore, a certifiable disease.
>
> We are all animals, and therefore, we are continually being attracted. That this attraction should extend to what is called love is a human misfortune cultivated by novelists. It is the horror we feel of ourselves, that is of being alone with ourselves, which draws us to love, but this love should happen only once, and never be repeated, if we have, as we should, learnt our lesson, which is that we are, all and each one of us, always and always alone.

That this magnificent and uncompromising declaration is sincere there can be no doubt. But neither can we doubt that Green was sincere in agreeing, at about the same time, that all of his books are love stories, "inspired by the belief that love is the most absorbing human experience of all and therefore the most hopeful." Green himself ardently mixes darkness and light, and his work must always

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appeal to those readers who, like him, do not fear life's inevitable contradictions.

"Really, one should burn everything"

Anthony Thwaite, editor
Selected Letters of Philip Larkin, 1940-1985. Faber & Faber (London), 791 pages, £20

reviewed by Penelope Fitzgerald

There is no direct train from London to Hull, in Yorkshire. You have to change at Doncaster. Philip Larkin used to claim that he went on working there because literary curiosity-seekers (not to speak of "Jake Balokowsky, my biographer") would be daunted when they discovered that the journey took three to four hours, and might decide on another poet instead.

Certainly Hull seemed like seclusion, almost retreat, with correspondence as a lifeline. "Postmen like doctors go from house to house"—although Anthony Thwaite is perhaps too optimistic in saying that Larkin thought of both of them as healers. Postmen and doctors make mistakes, and the relief they bring is often only temporary.

Larkin decided early on against marriage, risking loneliness in exchange. He valued jazz, cricket, drink, women (some women), books (some books), poetry, and friendship. "'Friend' can mean three things," he wrote somewhat sourly in 1941, "acquaintance, comrade, or antagonist." Of his three joint literary executors, all were unquestionably his comrades and two are poets—Andrew Motion, whose biography of Larkin comes out this year, and Anthony Thwaite, who edited the *Collected Poems* (criticized for putting in too much) in 1988 and these *Selected Letters* (criticized for leaving out too much) in 1992. The third executor, Monica Jones, a university lecturer, was by far the closest of Larkin's women friends.

The correspondence will only be completely comprehensible when the biography appears. Meanwhile, faced by several thousand letters, Thwaite has had to save space and at the same time do what he could about some awkward gaps. Only a dozen or so letters to Monica Jones have been made available (although Thwaite discreetly says that "apparent losses may later be recovered"), and it seems that those to Bruce Montgomery (the detective writer Edmund Crispin) can't be inspected until 2035. George Hartley, the publisher of Larkin's first important collection, *The Less Deceived* (1955), reserved *his* letters because he wanted to sell them unexcerpted. And the important correspondence with Kingsley Amis, who first met Larkin when they were students together at Oxford, and to whom the very last letter in this book, dictated just before the final operation, is addressed—this correspondence, too, is rather ragged.

Thwaite's job, or one of them, has been to show the "stages of life" which Larkin himself so dreaded—the inescapable I-told-you-so of mortality. First there's the adolescent, trying out romantic ideas and dirty language. Here the chief correspondent is Jim Sutton, who knew Larkin as an eight-year-old schoolboy at King Henry VIII School, Coventry. Sutton never became a celebrity. He was an unsuccessful painter, an Army driver in the war, later a chemist's dispenser, and evidently a choice spirit. To him Larkin confided not only his early disappointments with publishers and with sex but his concept of poetry itself. "A poem is just a thought of the imagination—not really logical at all. In fact I should like to make it quite clear to my generation and all subsequent generations that I have no ideas about poetry at all. For me, a poem is the crossroads of my thoughts, my feelings, my imaginings, my wishes, and my verbal sense: normally these run parallel . . . often two or more cross . . . but only when all cross at one point does one get a poem." At this time he was "humanly although perhaps not excusably tired of not getting any money or reviews or any sort of reputation." The only "adventurous" thing in his life, he told the agent Alan Pringle, was to

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apply and be selected for the public librarianship at Wellington, Shropshire, replacing a man of seventy-six, and "handing out antiquated tripe to the lower levels of the general public" for £175 a year. And yet by the time he was twenty-five he had published two novels and a volume of poetry. The poems had only one reviewer, but that reviewer was D. J. Enright.

From the 1950s his life quite rapidly, if warily, expands. The toad, work, always keeps a precious jewel in its head of self-doubt, misanthropy, and irony. But the nervous beginner becomes what he has to admit is a well-known poet, and the young writer who signed his first book contract for £30 turns out to be an excellent business man. To Patsy Strang (whom he met after moving from Shropshire to Belfast) there is his first series of love letters, or something very like them. "You are the sort of person one can't help feeling (in a carping kind of way) *ought* to come one's way *once* in one's life." When she decamps to Paris, he tells her she is like "a rocket, leaving a shower of sparks to fall on the old coal shed as you whoosh upwards." In 1959 he was appointed to the University Library of Hull. In 1961 he was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for poetry. It was not until the end of the Seventies that he began to feel the wretched approach of dryness, although even then he "would sooner write no poems than bad poems." Thwaite believes that this drying-up or desertion was partly, at least, the result of the unsettling experience of his last move. In 1973 the University of Hull decided to sell off its "worst properties," including the one where he lived, and he became, for the first time, a houseowner, faced with endless practical difficulties, and feeling "like a tortoise that has been taken out of one shell and put in another." But even this experience never stopped him from writing letters.

Two omissions seem strange. There are no letters to Larkin's family, not even to his mother, to whom he wrote regularly until her death at the age of ninety-one. And there are almost none to do with his official career at Hull, and yet the building of the Library Extension, of which he had been in charge since his arrival, was, as he put it, "the daysman of my thought, and hope, and doing." At the same time, he was secretary of the university's publishing committee. Very likely these letters might be considered dull, but dullness is a necessary part of most existences, and certainly of Philip Larkin's.

What was he like, exactly? Having decided, by its usual mysterious processes, that Larkin was one of the very few living poets that anyone (apart from students and teachers) wanted to buy and read, the British public accepted his persona from the poems they knew, and grew attached to it. He was modest and humorous, lived out of tins in rented rooms, was "unchilded and unwifed," worked decently hard without becoming rich, visited churches as a wistful sightseer, had missed the sexual revolution of the Sixties by being born too early, was "nudged from comfort" by the sight of ships and aircraft departing and of the old people's ward. He refused to bother about what didn't interest him. He was the writer who, when asked by the interviewer about the influence of Borges, said: "Who's Borges?" New music, a new generation's language, was not what he wanted. "My mind has stopped at 1945, like some cheap wartime clock," he told Kingsley Amis. In defiance of realism's bad reputation, he continued to write about the recognizable human condition. "I'm not interested in things that aren't true." But with this marvelous talent for the clearest possible everydayness he combined the torment of the romantic conscience and, however embarrassing it might be, the romantic vision. In "The Whitsun Weddings" he is forced to admit—though not until the train is nearly into London—that the absurd honeymoon couples, and not himself, are the source of fertility and future change. The "success or failure of the poem [when read aloud] depends on whether it gets off the ground on the last two lines" he explains to Anthony Thwaite in 1959.

To a considerable extent, the Larkin of these letters is the reader's familiar Larkin.

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What you paid for is what you get. But there are passages that are not so reassuring. It isn't so much that he sent for girlie magazines and, for long periods, drank too much and got "routinely pissed," or even that he allowed himself to resent the success of others and to hate extensively. His women colleagues in Belfast were "old Sowface" and "old Bagface." Seamus Heaney is "the Gombeen man," R. S. Thomas "Arse Thomas," Ted Hughes a "boring old monolith" and "no good at all," but so are Pope, Shelley, Robert Lowell. Blake is an ass, Byron a bore. "I find old Henry James repulsive sitting there *cuddling his ideas*, like a butler warming up the undermaids!" Still, these are private letters. Who would want to be answerable for everything they've said, in private letters, to friends they hope to amuse? More distressing by far are his general opinions, forcibly expressed, which leave the whole concept of political incorrectness gasping. If they represent what he really or even sometimes felt, immigration (LETTING THE BUGGERS IN HERE) must be made illegal before every household in the land is overrun, unemployment should be got rid of by stopping national assistance, workingmen are "awful shits marching or picketing," the Labour Party are Communists who would like to see him in a camp for dissidents. In a Hull student's paper he was said to have "Judged it prudent/ Never to speak to any student," and if they continue to demonstrate he recommends flogging.

How seriously were his correspondents supposed to take all this? I think quite seriously. When I was working in an unimportant capacity for the British Arts Council Literary Panel, Larkin was asked for advice on the funding of ethnic arts centers. He replied that anyone lucky enough to be allowed to settle here had a duty to forget their own culture and try to understand ours.

Thwaite, it has been suggested, has done his best, through his selection and omission, to sweep things under the carpet and give as favorable a picture as possible. This may be so. And perhaps he was touched by Larkin's mild complaint to a woman friend: "[I am] rather depressed by the remorseless scrutiny of one's private affairs that seems to be the fate of the newly dead. Really, one should burn everything."

It has even been argued that Larkin, a favorite with examiners and educators, shouldn't, after the publication of this book, be allowed any longer onto the school syllabus. But what schoolchildren learn and will continue to learn from his poems is that "what will survive of us is love." And there is some evidence of this too in the *Selected Letters*—in his encouragement of Barbara Pym, for example, when she was struggling with unresponsive publishers, a correspondance which became what Thwaite calls "a delightful and moving intimacy." There are the pains he took for his old friend Jim Sutton, who had written an unsaleable book on his war experiences, his loyalty to long-term library colleagues, and his agonizing worry over the health of Monica Jones. His letter to Douglas Dunn, after the death of Dunn's first wife, begins: "Dear Douglas—I don't know whether it is harder to speak or write to you of these last weeks. Whichever I am doing seems the more difficult."

Thwaite makes only the modest claim to have compiled "an interim account of a memorable man, much loved by many people." Meanwhile, I imagine, he must be scanning the horizon for the arrival of Andrew Motion, whose *Life*, let's hope, will provide him with a much-needed and decisive ally.

Gestures of return

Richard Rodriguez Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father. Viking, 230 pages, $21

reviewed by David Klinghoffer

The writer Richard Rodriguez is the son of Mexican immigrants who pole-vaulted into the American middle-class. He grew up in Sacramento during the 1950s, was educated at Catholic schools, graduated Stanford and

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Columbia, and in the early 1970s set to work on a Ph.D. in English Renaissance literature at Berkeley. It was the dawn of affirmative action, and though, he wrote later, "I was not really more socially disadvantaged than the white graduate students in my classes," affirmative-action officers directed generous grants and prestigious teaching posts his way. This seemed unfair to Rodriguez, and he said so. In a series of essays published in national magazines, he bravely protested. Most beneficiaries of affirmative action, he said, either were like him, and unneedful of the advantage, or they were unprepared for it, products of the inner city often left "illiterate in two languages" by bilingual education.

But the more Rodriguez protested, the better he was treated. Civic organizations and universities flew him around the country to be exhibited at fancy hotels and before groups of academics. Finally, his dissertation still unfinished, he was offered a professorship at Yale. This was too much. Again bravely, rather than accept the job, he quit academia altogether to write—yet more about himself. The charming and incisive book he published in 1982, *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, wrenchingly described the isolation he felt from his less assimilated parents. He decided to write another largely autobiographical work. With regular assignments from *The Los Angeles Times* and *Harper's* magazine, he seemed to be settling into a lifetime as the professional anti-multicultural Hispanic on the American op-ed scene, regurgitating his youth and railing against affirmative action and bilingualism until Doomsday.

From that depressing hack's fate, it's clear from his new book, he has admirably escaped. It turns out that the larger problem Rodriguez was fated to address is that of how Americans should regard their past as descendants of immigrants. At a time when the imagination of upper-middle-class America is perpetually distracted by various romantic notions of "authenticity"—from the interest in classical music played on "authentic" period instruments to the guilt felt by whites at failing to indulge Third World immigrants in their desire to engage in "authentic" Third World cultural expressions—he wants to know if that past is something to be transcended, or retrieved and embraced.

In *Hunger of Memory* Rodriguez remembers walking the Berkeley campus with his mother and father, seeing Hispanic students dressed up in Indian-style serapes, and sensing his parents' discomfort at this "clownish" display, a discomfort Rodriguez shared. *Days of Obligation*, published ten years later, is subtitled "An Argument with My Mexican Father." That argument is never clearly defined in this fascinating, suggestive collection of essays.

Some of the most enjoyable passages in the book don't really contribute at all to what you could call its thesis, which needs to be teased out. Rodriguez writes in a telegraphic, epigrammatic way about California and Mexico, in order to illustrate opposing ways of viewing the past—some associated with his very pessimistic and tradition-minded father, others with Californians of a less serious and more sentimental frame of mind. He prefers to direct argument the telling observation, the understated irony. During a week spent reporting on cultural differences between the Mexican border city Tijuana and San Diego ("In Athens Once"), he notes that Mexicans, with their "gray air, brown water, papacy, leprosy, crime, diarrhea, white powders, and . . . language full of newts and cicadas," think of Americans as a sterile, barren people, without a sense of gravity. Rodriguez notices that "within the porticos of the great churches of Mexico are signs reminding visitors to behave with dignity. The signs are in English."

Rodriguez's style will remind many readers of Joan Didion. She herself might have written the first paragraph of an absorbingly bizarre piece, about a mad Jesuit priest and the severed body part of a nineteenth-century bandito ("The Head of Joaquín Murrieta"), which repeatedly uses the Didionesque locutions "this is a story about" and

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"may or may not." His self-conscious interest in narrative as a form, and a fixation on the early days of California's Central Valley, also recall Miss Didion. In fact both writers grew up in Sacramento—she among the dwindling, spiritually exhausted children of early Protestant pioneer families, he among recently arrived Mexican Catholics, surging in number and energy—and have come to view the world through the prism of their Sacramento childhoods.

If Rodriguez has a single unifying theme, it is reflected in this division of Sacramento, between Joan Didion's Protestants and his own Catholics. In his mind, the theological division helps to explain a major development in American culture: the transformation of this once gregarious but cohesive country into one organized according to what one might call the condominium principle, in which ethnic groups live under a single national roof but are divided in every other way and forever squabbling over who's got the best parking space. He sees multiculturalism as the logical outcome of our Protestant founding.

Rodriguez expresses this unlikely idea with a compelling, poetic flourish. "This nation was formed from a fear of the crowd," he writes in an essay called "Asians." "Those early Puritans trusted only the solitary life. Puritans advised fences. Build a fence around all you hold dear and respect other fences. Protestantism taught Americans to believe that America does not exist—not as a culture, not as a shared experience, not as a communal reality." At the same time, "it was the antisociability of American Protestantism which paradoxically allowed for an immigrant nation. Lacking a communal sense, how could Americans resist the coming of strangers? America became a multiracial, multireligious society precisely because a small band of Puritans did not want the world."

Puritans feared crowds and disdained to think of themselves as constituting a nation in company with less devout colonists. For such pride, their punishment has been to give birth to a nation composed of crowds, who, as time goes by, have built extensive fenceworks around themselves—thanks to bilingualism, multiculturalism, racial separatism—and so have come to share less and less with each other. This thumbnail sketch of American history may not be literally true; but the irony of it is too rich, and it seems to clarify too much, to dismiss.

And anyway, Rodriguez is interested above all in the evolution of cultural assumptions, and it is certainly true that one of those, in the case of radical Protestantism, is that men are capable of locating Salvation—or learning math, as the case may be—unguided by a traditional authority with the power to set norms. The parallel with present-day liberal ideology is obvious. (Though of course the belief in radical autonomy is much older than Protestantism. It goes back to the rebellion in the wilderness by Korah, who argued that Moses and Aaron should have no power to rule over the Israelites, since "all the congregation is holy." For which Korah was decisively swallowed up by a crack in the earth.)

By 1968, the deterioration of America's Protestant culture had sped up considerably. In "The Latin American Novel," which suggests a quirky connection between the rise of novel-writing in Latin America and the rise of Latin American Protestantism, Rodriguez writes about the moment he lost his faith in the New Left:

> Date my defection from the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. After his death, the Pauline vision of a society united is undermined by hack radicals like Stokely Carmichael, proclaiming a conventional protestant separatist line.
>
> A manufactured sign in somebody's dormitory window [at Columbia] urges passersby to QUESTION AUTHORITY.
>
> Why—me with my Samsonite briefcase—why should one simply, as a matter of reflex, question authority? I continue to my carrel at the [Union Theological Seminary] library to confront the Protestant Reformation.

There he read Puritan autobiographies, by people who "speak from their pine houses

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and from within the rings of their candles about personal confrontations with God." The decade of the Sixties he calls "a Protestant flowering."

Rodriguez suggests another consequence of small-p protestantism in an essay about a trip he took along the route followed by Junipero Serra, the Franciscan priest who established California's mission system almost five hundred years ago ("The Missions"). His theme here is "the fragility of memory, the destruction of evidence." After Mexico won its independence from Spain, and California passed under Mexican sovereignty, the missions were "secularized." By the time California was conquered by the U.S., in a largely bloodless series of engagements in which the U.S. Army tended to show up for battle and the Mexicans tended to run away, the missions had begun to molder and collapse.

Their saviors, ironically, were Protestants: members of the Native Daughters of the Golden West, a sort of West Coast D.A.R. dedicated to preserving artifacts of California's history. With help from Coors Distributing and Union Oil, the mission at San Jose, for instance, was entirely rebuilt, "from the ground up—a complete fake."

In the restoration of the missions Rodriguez finds another Protestant paradox. A strain in our founding Puritan ideology, he says, has always argued for the healthiness of putting distance between America and the Old World, of discarding mementos of the past. We cultural descendants of the Puritans fear the past and increasingly avoid studying it; and yet we feel bereft by the loss of a sense of historical groundedness. The result is sham attempts at constructing history "from the ground up," indeed the whole cult of authenticity, extending at its silliest level to the hunger among stylish young urban costumers for brand-new products (Fossil wrist watches, "antiqued" candle holders, "preaged" shirts and khakis by Ralph Lauren) that *look* old.

The Native Daughters of the Golden West, like many Americans, "fear oblivion"—which is to say, the decimation of reminders that they belong to a history. At the same time they fear the contradictions of real history; and so erect fake missions, buy preaged denim, and indulge multiculturalism. One might say that this last, "a Protestant issue," has brilliantly succeeded in part by appropriating the cult of authenticity for the use of a left-wing political ideology. Thus when Junipero Serra was considered by the Roman Catholic Church for honors intended as prerequisite to sainthood, multiculturalists responded by portraying Serra as the leading villain of early California history. As Rodriguez puts it, Serra became the "Angel of the Fiery Sword." In civilizing the Indians, Serra forever expelled them from an Eden of innocence and "authenticity."

In all discussions of multiculturalist educators and activists, Rodriguez finds this assumption of dark-skinned innocence—that, like "the angelic dolphins," Indians and blacks can only be corrupted by contact with higher life forms. So we seek to protect dark people—through bilingual education and separate academic departments for African-American studies, by educating dark-skinned children in the history of Africa and Asia while slighting the West—as an act of nostalgia, mourning our own ever more faint memories of European history, but also as an act of aggression against that same European history: "Hispanics and Asians have become the convenient national excuse for the accomplishment of what America has always wanted done—their severing of memory, the dismantlement of national culture. The end of history." The Puritan spirit lives on.

Rodriguez believes that the solution to historical ignorance and minority alienation is a return to the kind of education that used to prepare young people to engage in the public life, to think of themselves as sharing a common national identity. "Lacking any plural sense of ourselves, how shall we describe Americanization, except as a loss?" The prospect of bringing about a change that deep in the philosophy of our educational establishment may or may not, as Rodriguez might put it, be realistic.

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Still, as he demonstrates in these two valuable books, he himself is proof that the child of immigrants can transcend cultural and racial origins, and through education and intelligence rise high enough to survey his parents' adopted country, and explain more than a little of it to the benighted natives.

A politicized Plath

Jacqueline Rose
The Haunting of Sylvia Plath.
Harvard University Press,
288 pages, $24.95

reviewed by Richard Tillinghast

The premise of *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, by Jacqueline Rose, is that "Sylvia Plath haunts our culture," illuminating and even anticipating debates that are currently in vogue, such as the conflicting claims of art and popular culture, and the connection between women's sexual fantasies and gender-based power relations—to name only two. Rose has a way of staking out an argument in terms more favorable to how she chooses to define an issue *a priori* than to how it might seem to readers who don't ride her particular hobby horses. It is convenient to the author's argument for her to say that "execrated and idolised, Plath hovers between the furthest poles of positive and negative appraisal." The negative side of such a dichotomy grossly misrepresents the current critical opinion of Plath's poetry, which is all but universally held in high esteem.

It is true that "there are those who pathologize Plath, freely diagnose her as schizophrenic or psychotic, read her writings as symptom or warning, something we should both admire and avoid." Does it follow, as Rose goes on to say, that "the spectre of psychic life rises up in her person as a monumental affront for which she is punished"? I think not. Readers are more likely to feel pity or wonder. Anne Stevenson asserts in her 1989 biography, *Bitter Fame*, that "Plath's true subject was this inner self, not her outer experiences and achievements." Rose counters:

> Feminism has rightly responded to this form of criticism by stressing the representative nature of Plath's inner drama, the extent to which it focuses the inequities (the pathology) of a patriarchal world. But in so doing, it has tended to inherit the framework of the critical language it seeks to reject. Plath becomes innocent—man and patriarchy are to blame. More important, psychic life is stripped of its own logic; it becomes the pure effect of social injustice, wholly subservient to the outside world which it unfailingly reflects.

In this book "feminism" is presented as a monolithic, unnuanced body of opinion, when in reality the term must embrace thousands of varying positions. But Rose has detailed at least two sides of this multifaceted phenomenon.

Like practically everyone else, including those who have read only one or two poems from *Ariel*, Rose finds herself drawn into the Plath controversy. She takes broad swipes at *Bitter Fame*, which, however, remains the most incisive study of Plath's life and work—though its credibility is weakened by the intrusive editorial hand of Plath's former sister-in-law, Olwyn Hughes. According to Rose, "one of the strangest effects" of reading *Bitter Fame* "is that it precisely becomes impossible to know whom to believe." This doesn't prevent her from loading the dice—or even from fudging quotations—when it suits her purpose. In a letter to her patron Olive Prouty, Plath referred to Ted Hughes as "a breaker of things and people." Accuracy is not served by Rose's saying: "She expresses her fear of his destructiveness as she sees it, his reputation—in her terms—as seducer and blaster of *women* and things" [my italics].

The essential problem is that Rose approaches her material not from a literary but from a psychoanalytical point of view. Plath was overwhelmingly concerned with the question that haunts all artists when evalu-

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ating their own work—"Is this stuff any good?" For Rose, and increasingly for the majority of those who used to be called critics and now call themselves literary theorists, this is a non-question. She just cannot grasp why Plath agreed with her editor at Knopf to omit all but two sections of her "Poem for a Birthday" from her first book, *The Colossus*. The poem is embarrassingly derivative of Theodore Roethke (a major influence on both Plath and Hughes), almost to the point of parody. Ted Hughes has indeed called the poem "a deliberate Roethke pastiche, something light and throwaway to begin with, but might lead to something else."

> Let me sit in a flowerpot,
> The spiders won't notice.
> My heart is a stopped geranium.
>
> If only the wind would leave my lungs alone.
> Dogbody noses the petals. They bloom upside down.
> They rattle like hydrangea bushes.

Rose comments that "the criticism that Plath is derivative seems to be absolutely pointless in a context where the engendering of language . . . is what is being represented inside the text. In fact the poems could be said to stage the pre-Oedipal version of the anxiety of influence—the question being not what she took from Roethke but what it is about taking and giving, in relation to language, that she uses him to explore." In other words, Rose hasn't the remotest clue as to what goes on when one is writing a poem—nor, apparently, has she any desire to see the poetic process from the poet's point of view.

One salutary effect of this book, though, is to unstick the debate surrounding Sylvia Plath from the pathology/patriarchy question, which Rose sums up as follows: "Pathology . . . makes her guilty—her tragedy the inevitable outcome of the troubles of her mind. Patriarchy means that man, meaning Hughes or the male sex he stands for, is to blame—the woman internalizes, turns against herself, the violence of the world outside." Still, I was a bit startled to read that "in this book, in the analysis of those writings, I am never talking of real people, but of textual entities (Y and X) whose more than real reality, I will be arguing, goes beyond them to encircle us all. It has been objected that writing on Plath is a fantasia with no purchase on, or even interest in, the truth. This book starts from the assumption that Plath is a fantasy."

Rose shows that the editorial omissions made not only by the Hugheses but by her mother, Aurelia Plath, have given us a less political Plath than in fact her journals, letters, and even her Smith College papers show her to have been. Why does Plath's novel, *The Bell Jar*, begin "It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York"? In part because Plath herself had been a victim of electroshock therapy. But in a well-argued defense of Plath's use of Holocaust imagery in "Daddy," Rose shows that Jewishness was a consistent preoccupation of Plath's, not the gratuitous expropriation that other commentators have seen. As a German-American during World War II, Plath got a dose of abuse and social ostracism from her schoolmates in that intensely patriotic period when German-bashing was at its height. This exposure ironically allowed Plath to empathize with the Jews in Germany.

Probably the most interesting part of *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* is Rose's discussion of Plath's relation to popular literary culture. Obviously these days, when "Cultural Studies" seems to be supplanting the study of literature in universities (and not only in the U.S.—Rose teaches at London University and the University of Sussex), popular culture is a trendy subject. And this book is nothing if not trendy.

Plath's involvement with magazines like *The Saturday Evening Post*, her attempts to write popular novels (she referred to *The Bell Jar* as a "potboiler"), and the lack of attention paid to this aspect of her work, make this, according to Rose, a feminist issue—

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"for feminists have been among the first to point out that the denigration of popular culture carries with it a specific denigration of women." It does help to see Plath within the context of the totality of her writing. Rose seems, however, to miss the point of Plath's own priorities, which clearly elevate literary art over writing which is done quickly, for money alone: "I can write for the women's slicks: More and more this comes over me—as *easily* as I wrote for *Seventeen*, while keeping my art intact." Not surprisingly in the current climate of literary theory (Rose is a fierce one for attacking "high-art pretension"), art gets little respect in these pages.

Endangered tradition

John Gross The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters: Aspects of English Literary Life Since 1800. Ivan R. Dee, 361 pages, $14.95 paper

reviewed by Hilton Kramer

This new edition of *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters* brings back into print one of the classic works of modern literary history. First published in 1969, when its subject, although already declared an anachronism in the academy, had not yet been swamped by the rising tide of literary theory, this study of the English man of letters was itself an admirable addition to the tradition it anatomized. It is a tradition that began, for all practical purposes, with the publication of the *Edinburgh Review* in the aftermath of the French Revolution, and is thus a distinctly modern phenomenon. What John Gross gave us in *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters* was a vivid account of the crucial place it had come to occupy in the cultural life of the modern world at the very moment when the legitimacy of the man-of-letters tradition was more and more under attack. At once a celebration of that tradition and an inquiry into its troubled condition, *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters* did more than any other study of its kind to remind us of what would be lost to contemporary cultural life if we allowed it to be destroyed by the forces already arrayed against its survival.

In his new introduction to this paperback edition of the book, Mr. Gross describes what his purposes were in writing it. "When I began sketching it out, in 1966," he writes,

> I was partly prompted by simple curiosity. I had become increasingly interested in the middlemen of nineteenth-century and twentieth-century literature, the commentators and interpreters; I wanted to find out more about them—as individuals, not as mere cultural symptoms or representative types. But I was also thinking of current conditions, and of where they were likely to lead. On the one hand you had the mass media, relentlessly pressing forward; on the other hand, the universities, steadily consolidating their grip on scholarship and intellectual life. How much room was there going to be left in between for the critic at large or the unattached *littérateur*? It seemed time to remind readers of endangered traditions, and to speak up for the virtues of independence.

In the quarter-century that has passed since the writing of this book, the situation in both the mass media and the universities has, of course, gotten to be even more threatening to "the virtues of independence" than it was in the 1960s, and Mr. Gross addresses some of these developments in the very spirited "Afterword" he has also written for this new edition. Yet it is, above all, for its illuminating account of the past that *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters* remains an indispensable book.

True to his ambition to write about individuals, Mr. Gross gives us brilliant portraits of an astonishing number of writers, both famous and obscure. He writes as well about Walter Bagehot and John Morley and Leslie Stephen as he does about G. K. Chesterton, T. S. Eliot, and George Orwell. With remarkable economy and focus, he takes us into the careers as well as the minds of his large cast of characters, carefully delineating

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the exact historical circumstances in which they worked, yet judiciously examining what might still be of value and what has proved to be perishable in what they wrote.

These are, moreover, the kind of portraits that place both the character of the writer and his literary mission in direct relation to the public issues of the day. While literature is never allowed to serve as a mere hostage to political controversy, it is the history of this relation between literature and public affairs that lies at the heart of this study, and about that relation Mr. Gross has many wise things to say. No one, for example, has given us a better account of what there is to admire and what to lament in the *Edinburgh* and the other reviews it spawned at the very beginning of the history that is traced in this book.

"It is hard for a modern reader not to feel in two minds about the reviews," Mr. Gross writes in his chapter on "The Rise of the Reviewer."

> They presupposed widespread public interest in many topics which have since been handed over almost exclusively to students and specialists; they offered serious writers an enviable amount of space, to say nothing of handsome rates of pay; they set a precedent for the solid journals of opinion . . . which were to play such a central role in the intellectual life of nineteenth-century Europe and America. On the other hand they were unashamed vehicles for party propaganda, often of the narrowest kind, and generally too overbearing and coarse-grained in their approach to encourage criticism of much depth. They were not even particularly well written.

About individual writers, too, Mr. Gross is often "in two minds," for he is himself both tough-minded when it comes to identifying the sheer quantity of humbug that was always a disfiguring component of the man-of-letters tradition and remarkably tender-minded in his determination to salvage whatever remains defensible in even the worst offenders. The only exception, perhaps, is in Mr. Gross's discussion of F. R. Leavis, upon whose life and work he lavishes a good deal of uncharacteristic spleen. Still, it is in the nature of a critic to have a *bête noire* or two, and in Leavis Mr. Gross took on a formidable one.

As for his own view of the literary profession he has so masterfully chronicled in this book, Mr. Gross writes with his customary good sense. "Whatever the future holds," he writes at the end of his afterword,

> the first qualification for being a good critic will always be an interest in literature for what it is, rather than for the ends which it can be made to serve. But the second qualification, no less essential, will be a commitment to the life which lies beyond literature, by which it must finally be judged. . . . In a world which favours experts and specialists, this means that the critic is increasingly liable to be dismissed as a dilettante or resented as a trespasser. But if his uncertain status often puts him at a disadvantage, it also makes possible, ideally, the breadth and independence which are his ultimate justification. In this sense, at least, however archaic it may seem in other respects, the idea of the man of letters has a place in any healthy literary tradition.

With this book, John Gross proved to be a worthy heir to the tradition he has memorialized so persuasively. *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters* is literary history that can take its place beside the best of Sainte-Beuve, Edmund Wilson, and other masters of the genre without apology, and the lessons it offers are, alas, even more important for us to attend to today than they were a quarter-century ago.

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Notebook

"Space," class, etc. at the New Museum

by Michael Brandow

Stepping into "In Transit," the current exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, visitors are made to feel that they have committed some thoughtless transgression.[1] The floor of the gallery's entryway has been laid with linoleum upon which has been printed, in serial, computer-generated form, a silhouetted pattern of starving black babies, evoking at once a statistical read-out and a television plea for African relief.

Looking up as we traverse this grim imagery, we are offered the second bit of visual information. No, we are not in Africa, after all, but in our own backyard, or, more precisely, in one of our dying American cities. The figures over which we have been invited to stroll lead to a cab-yellow billboard depicting a jogger on a morning run. Though he appears only in stark black profile, this jogger can be safely assumed to be white, middle-class, and if not suburban then surely suburban-bound. "*FASTER FASTER FASTER*" reads the caption below.

Now that we have been made to feel like unwitting parties to the slaughter of the innocents, we are presumably ready to be instructed in the mundane science of attributing causes to the scenes of urban despair that line the gallery walls. It is a specialty of the New Museum to "educate" its visitors in this hectoring, documentary style. According to Marcia Tucker, the museum's founder and director, hers is a "countercultural" institution, a place that is constantly "throw[ing] a grenade into the idea of exhibitions" and thereby doing away with the despised and outmoded "authoritarian" curatorial practices of the past. And just how is this perpetual "self-deinstitutionalization" accomplished? Why, by Ms. Tucker's hiring guest curators who "don't look at everything through white male eyes" or who at least specialize in "people" rather than art.

The guest "curators" of "In Transit," then, are an anthropologist from Columbia University and a political economist from the New School for Social Research, working under the direction of one of Ms. Tucker's senior curators. These two academics lend an illusion of "scientific" objectivity, based on social-science credentials, to the museum's progressive political agenda. It therefore comes as no surprise that documents and statistics are so much in evidence here. We are offered color photographs of various public-health violations in the Greenpoint-Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, as well as maps, industrial studies, and video tapes. Only by reading the printed hand-out accompanying "In Transit," however, is it possible to discern the meaning of this queer assemblage, though this "program," like most other of the New Museum's publications,

1 "In Transit" opened at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, on January 15, 1993, and remains on view through April 11. The exhibition was organized by France Morin, senior curator of the New Museum, with Kostas Gounis and Dr. John Jeffries.

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has been assembled in an inconsecutive, collage-like manner. In the opening section we read:

> The subject of *In Transit* is both the involuntary movement by human beings through urban spaces, and the practices through which spaces are produced, shaped, and represented.

To understand what is meant by this portentous sentence we are asked to examine in a numbered sequence a series of photo enlargements, color-coded maps, and collages, the execution of which seldom exceeds the level of a high-school art fair.

All of this is designed to make visitors feel that they are somehow part of the "creative" process. A questionnaire (or, rather, a "work") called *Trespassing* asks the public to "list ten places in New York City where you cannot, may not, or should not go. You may include places that are illegal or dangerous, places you have never been, and places you feel uncomfortable or where you are made to feel you don't belong." Below are "optional" questions for the respondent regarding his gender, ethnic group, sexual preference, and annual income, information which will no doubt be incorporated into some future "work." On the other side of the room is displayed a pamphlet called *Objections*, which insists that "a material relation must exist between, for instance, the sexualized street harassment women encounter and the devaluation of women's work, art and other." Along another wall, aerial photographs of the South Bronx have been specked with recorded cases of AIDS. Questioning the "artistic" relevance of any one of the "works" in the carefully controlled environment of political correctness, of course, would only signify that we are heartless and indifferent to the problems they address. Such "art" is designed to be beyond aesthetic discussion.

The more ignorant, impressionable, and docile the public, the better for institutions like the New Museum. How else could they get away with the claim that such exhibitions as this are art when, for example, applying for a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts? In any case, there is nothing "new" in this New Museum production. What "In Transit" is, quite simply, is part of a grand triptych planned for 1993, the collective debris of the "brainstorming" performed last year upon the well-trodden theme of Christopher Columbus (i.e., colonial exploitation and cultural appropriation). The New Museum and its clones now follow a well-established program to discredit and supplant an outmoded culture that no longer reflects the social realities of the day. This is a program that yields all authority to social scientists, which is to say to politics, and requires the complete banishment of art in the interest of "redefining" it.

The program accompanying "In Transit" asserts that

> the complexity of urban experience is commonly reduced to simplistic oppositions between the "deserving" and the "undeserving poor," the "legitimate" and the "illegitimate," the "placed" and the "displaced." Such contrasts suggest that our ideas about space are somehow natural. They are not. Spatial categories are everywhere defined and imposed through mechanisms of domination, always in the interest of power. . . . Urban spaces are constantly reshaped through cycles of occupation, commodification, abandonment, and recycling that are dictated by the "needs" of the highly flexible and elusive capitalist accumulation process.

Here the "curators" have merely paraphrased a book that was once basic reading for sociology majors, *Communitas* by Paul and Percival Goodman. Like the authors of this early book on urban planning, the organizers of "In Transit" hope to astonish us with the revelation that cities are not, indeed, natural. Their litany is laced with synonyms for "alienation" and denunciations of—what else?—capitalism. We are likewise given throughout the exhibition many reminders that capitalism as an economic system could and should be replaced. A panoramic history of our once great American cities suggests

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that their demise is due to some basic flaw in the material base. Wrapped around the entire gallery, just below eye-level, is a series of cityscapes shot recently in several American ghettos. *The New American Ghetto*, as this chain of photos is called, shows the once opulent—and capitalist—theaters of our great cities transformed into shabby Food Kings. We are shown sights in the ghettos of Detroit, Chicago, New York, Newark, Watts, and Oakland that our sense of self-preservation would otherwise prevent us from seeing. Austere and magnificent capitalist bank buildings are now being used as Baptist churches, men's shelters, drug-treatment centers, and Domino's pizza outlets. But, more significantly, the capitalist Tiffany glass factory in Newark, which once made the decadent surplus articles criticized so by Marxists, has been made into a low-income housing facility. Along similar lines, we see the capitalist American Note Company of the South Bronx, "a plant that printed stock certificates, lottery tickets, and the currency of several Latin American nations" but that "now hosts about a dozen sweatshops."

The photos themselves would be fascinating to anyone with a taste for the macabre. But they have clearly been chosen for purposes other than aesthetic. They might be attractive simply as historical documents, and so it is a pity that they cannot be read outside the oppressive context of "In Transit." For just above these small color photos are larger ones in harsh black and white depicting the daily social life and laboring of black people in South Africa, and next to these the elegant backyards of their affluent neighbors. Such crude juxtapositions are to be expected, of course, from an arts establishment that, avowedly and proudly, "does not draw a sharp distinction between the descriptive and the metaphorical."

The program continues:

> As opposed to designating and denouncing the causes of urban distress, ["In Transit"] considers the diversity of aesthetic, political, social, and emotional reinterpretations of urban spaces as "conquested territories."

Despite this pretense of disinterestedness, the program ends with the following lesson, lest one mistake the purpose of "In Transit":

> The tendency to fortify and defend urban space against real and imagined predators ["real" being only those male rapists of women; "imagined" being those self-proclaimed enemies of all caucasians] is an overwhelming sentiment, fueled by an interest in preserving privilege and power. In these times of our global culture, it is prejudice and stigma, not geographic distance, which separate us from one another. *In Transit* is a documentation of this grim reality.

While "In Transit" is not itself an art exhibition, it must still be understood as an event in the art world as it evolved in the 1970s and 1980s, especially in the pell-mell transformation of SoHo, the seat of the New Museum, into a power center for the plastic arts. In that world, the word "space," in all its multiple meanings, dribbled off everyone's lips. "Space" was often used to refer to the place where one lived, worked, or exhibited. It was also used to refer to where one was "at" in one's interior life, as in the sentence "I am in a bad psychic space just now." Indeed, "space" is still used in all these ways, and in many, many others. It is for today's downtown art crowd what the word "materialism" once was for Marxists. The curators and artists that have brought us "In Transit" use the word with insistent frequency. Their show is all about the modern city's "forbidden spaces," "feared spaces," "ignored spaces," "shared spaces," "needed spaces," "architecturally given spaces," "space as both concept and resource," "empty *vs.* vacant spaces," "redundant spaces," and, most important, "the politics of space."

As for the space occupied by the New Museum itself, what is it finally but the space of art-world fashion? Its very location is symptomatic of its fetish for the chic, which is now interpreted entirely in political terms. "In Transit" may not be art. It may not even be interesting. But it does tell us what has supplanted an interest in art in this particular corner of the art scene.

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